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# Combat Trauma and Tragic Catharsis: An Aristotelian Account of Tragedy and Trauma

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# Combat Trauma and Tragic Catharsis: An Aristotelian Account of Tragedy and Trauma

Eddie Hoffmann

12 January 2015

γλυκύ δ' ἀπείρω πόλεμος.

πεπειραμένων δέ τις ταρβεῖ προσιόντα νιν καρδία περισσῶς.

~Πινδάρως

*(Fragment 110)*

Only after the horrors of Vietnam did the emotional trials of war seem to finally settle into the American popular consciousness, and by now, psychologists have settled on a clinical definition of what they call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Given our own very recent recognition of what I will henceforward refer to as combat trauma, many attribute the phenomenon to the conditions particular to modern war.<sup>1</sup> While many changes have occurred in the way soldiers fight in recent years, the nature of war seems to stay the same more than it changes. Thus, in World War I, combat trauma was known as shell shock. Ernst Jünger describes one German soldier in his account of his war experiences, *Storm of Steel*:

Sitting next to him in the roadside ditch, I questioned him avidly...and got from him a grey tale of days hunkered in craters, with no outside contact or communications lines, of incessant attacks, fields of corpses and crazy thirst, of the wounded left to die, and more of the same. The impassive features under the rim of the steel helmet and the monotonous voice accompanied by the noise of the battle made a ghostly impression on us. A few days had put their stamp on the runner, who was to escort us into the realm of flame, setting him inexorably apart from us. 'If a man falls, he's left to lie. No one can help. No one knows if he'll return alive. Every day we're attacked, but they won't get through. Everyone knows this is life and death.' Nothing was left in his voice but equanimity, apathy; fire had burned everything else out of it.<sup>2</sup>

This brave soldier's traumatic emotional injury had left him a shell of his former self. In his *Henry IV*, Shakespeare describes its symptoms with eerie similarity to the modern formulation of the symptoms of PTSD: "In faint slumbers I by thee have watch'd,/ and heard thee murmur iron tales of wars.../The spirit within thee hath been so at war/And thus hath so bestirr'd thee in thy sleep,/That beads of sweat have stood upon they brow,/Like bubbles in late-disturbed stream."<sup>3</sup>

Even ancient Greeks seem to have experienced combat trauma. Jonathan Shay's analysis of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*, respectively, indicate

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<sup>1</sup> Psychologist John Shay insists that this is the more accurate rendering: PTSD makes what is in reality "moral injury" sound like a disease. For the purposes of this paper, combat trauma is a moral and emotional injury induced by the stress of combat and exacerbated by factors such as betrayal and loss of a close friend. Shay 1994:28-32.

<sup>2</sup> Jünger 2004:92

<sup>3</sup> Shay 1994:166 Shay quotes *Henry IV, Part I* act 2, sc. 3, lines 40-62.

that the ancient Greeks knew combat trauma and its attendant sufferings well.<sup>4</sup> Shay compared the experience of the veterans in his clinic to those of Achilles and Odysseus, noting that the similarities between these trauma patients and accounts of the Greek heroes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were too close to pass by. The representation of trauma is not limited to the epic genre. Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoktetes* both portray soldiers who have been severely psychologically injured by their own sufferings and by their commanders' and comrades' betrayal.

Noting these themes in tragedy, classicist and director Brian Doerries has staged several productions of Greek tragedies for veterans of America's most recent wars. The results were astounding. In discussion after the production, soldiers openly shared sentiments in front of a crowd of several hundred that they had perhaps never shared with intimates before.<sup>5</sup> The plays allowed them to see their own failures and successes in a new light; they retouched the ugliness of their sufferings and made that ugliness sublime. As a result, the soldiers were able to share experiences and address issues that they had bottled up inside their own souls. Some weight that had prevented them from even discussing their experiences had been lifted from their souls through the force of the dramas they witnessed. Some excess of fear or lack of pity had been moderated; they were once again more themselves than they had been for a long, weary time.

Doerries' productions achieved an element of ancient drama that scholars have long sought to understand definitively. It is what the ancients used to call catharsis (καθάρσις), literally, purification. Since Aristotle penned the *Poetics*, scholars have debated exactly what he meant by that term. In modern times, most classicists have discussed that subject relying primarily on a very narrow context for their research: most limit themselves to the *Poetics* itself; some of the more adventurous reach out into the *Ethics*, *Politics*, or *Metaphysics* to bolster their

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<sup>4</sup> Shay 1994; Shay 2000

<sup>5</sup> Doerries 2015b:88

interpretation. Few indeed have sought to understand the political context of Aristotle's work on tragedy in order to locate the philosopher's work in its own political and cultural conditions, however. Aristotle speaks of a catharsis of pity and fear, but few have asked whence excesses of pity and fear and other like emotions likely came, and whether their source might tell us something about catharsis.

I will claim that the sources of excesses and deficiencies in the emotions proper to tragedy do indeed help us to understand the process of their reformation through catharsis. With my first chapter, I will begin my argument with a summary of the evidence indicating that it is indeed likely that Greeks of the classical era suffered from combat trauma. Next, I will examine the question of the relation of Attic tragedy as a genre to combat trauma. It is evident upon even a cursory reading of certain plays, like Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoktetes*, that they speak to soldiers scarred by war. I will argue further, claiming that even those tragedies seeming most distant from conflict would still resonate with the experience of the soldier and begin to heal his emotional wounds.

The tragedies carry out this task through catharsis. Thus in the second chapter we must turn to Aristotle, and examine his *Poetics* to understand the philosophical backdrop of tragedy and especially tragic catharsis. Having established from this analysis that, at least in Aristotle's account, catharsis is the end of tragedy, I will turn to the broader Aristotelian corpus to establish the nature of the end of tragedy. Through this examination, I establish the nature of catharsis. I determine that catharsis is the process of healing injuries to the spirited portion of the soul, which the Greeks called *thumos*. The healing that takes place restores the thumetic emotions to the mean of virtue, thus rehabilitating the soul. My fourth and final chapter will examine the process by which this rehabilitation took place. Here, I will analyze the theories of catharsis common in

the scholarly tradition, examining their strengths and shortcomings in relation to my own claims regarding the nature of catharsis. Finally, I will present my own hypothesis regarding the process of catharsis. Based on the clinical practice of Shay and the theater experience Doerries, I conclude that catharsis functioned through the formation and communalization of traumatic narratives.

The beauty of Greek philosophy is that it remains inseparable from life. As a result, this research into the nature of tragedy in general, and catharsis especially, transcends mere scholarly pursuits. The Greeks still have many lessons to teach us, for better or worse. We have learned all too well and seem to be unable to shake their penchant for combat. Trapped in conflict after weary conflict, we stand in desperate need of their ability to reconstruct the virtue of veterans whose hearts tremble at the approach of war.

## Chapter I: Combat Trauma and Tragedy

Before turning to an interpretation of catharsis that takes its bearings from the Greek experience of combat trauma, it is necessary to establish that the ancient Greeks would have experienced combat trauma, and that tragedy served as therapy for that trauma. It is of course impossible to diagnose the subjective mental states of men who have been dead for millennia to determine if they suffered from trauma. To further complicate our quest, historical sources, at first glance, seem rather barren of information regarding the experience of the individual soldier. Interested in grander geopolitical and moral themes, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon often tend to miss the gory details that give us a better feel for the soldier's experience. However, these historical sources do describe a scheme of battle that was ugly, brutal, and deadly. Despite this fact, certain authors claim that ancient soldiers might not have experienced combat trauma in the same way as modern soldiers do, due to cultural differences between our society and theirs. In order to refute such claims, it will be necessary to turn to Greek literature, particularly lyric poetry and tragedy, which does demonstrate an understanding not only of the horrors of war, but also of the psychological cost of those horrors. I conclude that Greeks of the classical period did indeed experience combat trauma and that tragic catharsis served as a therapy for that trauma.

Phalanx warfare was a brutal, gory, and ugly method of combat. In general, we think that the average battle would have occurred in roughly the following way: two armies would normally meet on normally a level plain, on which large phalanxes could maneuver easily.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> We are far from an exact and certain understanding of how phalanx warfare worked. A complete scholarly analysis is regrettably out of the scope of this chapter, which seeks but to justify that Greek combat soldiers did indeed suffer from combat trauma and that tragic catharsis in some way treated that trauma. For example, Victor Hanson (1989) argues that the typical *othismos* (literally, "pushing," the final clash of phalanxes) ended in a massive shoving match (a kind of reverse tug of war) between the two masses of men. Christopher Mathew (Mathew 2009) argues that the phalanxes would have stopped a spear length away from their opponents and exchanged spear thrusts from that distance. I tend to favor Hanson's view in the material that follows, but it is outside the scope of this

When ready, the armies would move toward each other at a measured pace, conserving their energy for a final push. At that point, the forces would clash. After a brief pushing and shoving match or exchange of blows, one phalanx or the other would have to give. Individual excellence could not have had as much of a part to play in phalanx warfare as brute laws of human inertia and force, inertia and force that left men dead by the hundreds. Two phalanxes of men battering into each other could create unimaginable carnage. Victor Hanson, basing his description on the histories of Xenophon and Thucydides, provides a description of what an actual battle might have looked like:

The collision must have been an unbelievable sight. The spears of both sides were nearing each other at some five miles an hour. At Koroneia in 394, Agesilaos' men "ran" to meet the enemy; when they came "within spear thrust," the enemy collapsed from the very shock. (Xen. *Hell.* 4.3.17) Indeed, the narratives of the battles of Mantinea, Delion, Nemea, and Leuktra, not to mention the accounts of earlier (often nameless) conflicts in the Lyric poets, make no sense unless we understand that both sides literally collided together, creating the awful thud of forceful impact at the combined rate of ten miles per hour.<sup>7</sup>

If one phalanx did not collapse immediately, a brief period of pushing, straining, and shoving would follow, in which hoplites would more or less blindly stab their spears or swords at the mass of men in front of them while being shoved forward by the weight of row upon row of men behind them, the center of their comrades' shields planted squarely against their backs. In such mass warfare, any loss of ground would tend to escalate exponentially, sometimes turning a withdrawal into a retreat and a retreat into a rout. At this moment the winning phalanx could unleash its pent up fury, hacking and stabbing the now unprotected flanks and backs of the retreating mass of men. Xenophon in *Hellenica* 4.4.11-12 writes of just such a situation in a

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thesis to provide a detailed analysis of phalanx warfare. Fortunately, the specifics are immaterial to my case: the general claims that form the premise of my argument in the following paragraphs remain true whatever specific views we may take.

<sup>7</sup> Hanson 1989:157



Spartan victory over Argos. The Argive phalanx had collapsed, and the Spartans seized the opportunity:

οἱ δὲ Λακεδαιμόνιοι οὐκ ἠπόρουν τίνα ἀποκτείνουσιν: ἔδωκε γὰρ τότε γε ὁ θεὸς αὐτοῖς ἔργον οἷον οὐδ' ἠϋξαντό ποτ' ἄν. τὸ γὰρ ἐγγχειρισθῆναι αὐτοῖς πολεμίων πλῆθος πεφοβημένον, ἐκπεπληγμένον, τὰ γυμνὰ παρέχον, ἐπὶ τὸ μάχεσθαι οὐδένα τρεπόμενον, εἰς δὲ τὸ ἀπόλλυσθαι πάντας πάντα ὑπηρετοῦντας, πῶς οὐκ ἂν τις θεῖον ἡγήσαιο; τότε γοῦν οὕτως ἐν ὀλίγῳ πολλοὶ ἔπεσον ὥστε εἰθισμένοι ὀρᾶν οἱ ἄνθρωποι σωροὺς σίτου, ξύλων, λίθων, τότε ἐθεάσαντο σωροὺς νεκρῶν. ἀπέθανον δὲ καὶ οἱ ἐν τῷ λιμένι τῶν Βοιωτῶν φύλακες, οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ τῶν τειχῶν, οἱ δὲ ἐπὶ τὰ τέγη τῶν νεωσοίκων ἀναβάντες. (*Hellenica* 4.4.12)

As for the Spartans, they were at no loss about whom to kill next... Here was a great mass of their enemies delivered over to them in a state of utter panic, offering their unprotected sides, with no one making the least effort to fight and everyone doing everything possible to ensure his own destruction: what can one call this except an instance of divine intervention? Certainly on this occasion so many fell in such a short time that the dead bodies seemed to be heaped together like heaps of corn or piles of wood or stones.<sup>8</sup>

Even if such carnage was the exception in a hoplite battle rather than the rule, the potential for its occurrence was always present, and thus the fear that such could happen would be ever present.

Instability in war contributes to traumatic experience as much as violence and brutality.

The Greeks would have experienced radical changes in the way war was fought throughout the classical period. Accustomed to the set norms and methods of phalanx warfare described above, the Greeks faced an entirely new foe and way of fighting in the Persian Wars. Herodotus takes care to emphasize the fearsomeness of fighting the Persians, an unfamiliar and deadly foe, for the first time. (Herodotus *Histories* 6.94) His descriptions of the battle of Marathon are mythic in tone, including accounts of soldiers being blinded by fear of monstrous enemies, and casualty figures among the Persian forces of epic proportions. (Herodotus *Histories* 6.94-105)

Throughout his narrative of the rest of the war, he emphasizes that the Greeks had been threatened as never before. (Herodotus *Histories* 8.97-104) Both the actual experience of fighting

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<sup>8</sup> Translated in Rauflaab 2015:23 Here, the phalanx collapsed in not exactly the way described in the general summary above; however, the result (a broken phalanx being attacked by a sound one) was the same.

and the potential outcomes of the war were more dreadful in the Persian Wars than they would have been in the internal conflicts of archaic Greece, which tended to be short-lived and, compared to the horrific carnage of the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, relatively bloodless.

Having once tasted of the power of unrestricted warfare against the Persians, the Greeks turned the new horror of total war on each other. This changed method of war came complete with new fighting technologies. Thucydides describes, for example, the use of updated and horrible flame-throwing weaponry employed by the Corinthians at Delium in revenge for the Athenian violation of the temple precincts by fortifying the temple for their protection.<sup>9</sup> The old, simple war in which two masses of men would rush at each other on a level plain with no other weapons than swords and spears, was gone for good. New and more deadly ways of fighting would have added uncertainty to the many horrors of combat, making the experience of fighting more traumatic than ever before.

The effect of war upon an individual is often heightened by that war's effect on his society. It is useful, then to turn briefly to the question of ancient war's impact on the *polis*. War would have had an all-encompassing impact on civic life. Kurt Raaflaub writes that "of the years between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, Athens fought some kind of war in two out of every three years and the latter lasted 27 years."<sup>10</sup> The casualty figures of these wars stretch belief, but accurate or not, they reflect the very real magnitude of grief and loss. Raaflaub goes on to write that single campaigns, like the Athenian expedition to Egypt or to Sicily could cost huge losses (8000 and 10,000 respectively). The casualties on the Egyptian expedition would figure at one in every seven or eight adult male citizens. Raaflaub notes that

by the end of the Peloponnesian War, the citizen body had shrunk to less than half its prewar level. As Peter Hunt observes, if prorated the Athenian losses at Chaeronea

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<sup>9</sup> Monoson 2014:138

<sup>10</sup> Raaflaub 2015:23

are comparable to the losses of the main combatants in the entire First World War. The total figures of the Peloponnesian War, again prorated, dwarf anything that is known from modern warfare.<sup>11</sup>

For the Greeks of the classical age, war was not the exception but the rule, and when it occurred, its aftermath could destroy the whole framework of civic life.

Furthermore, though hoplite warfare would cause less civilian casualties than modern warfare as a general rule, this norm did not always hold. Thucydides describes an incident during the Peloponnesian war in which civil strife broke out in Corcyra. The Athenian admiral Eurymedon had approached the city with a fleet of triremes, bringing the latent political turmoil to a head. The result was shocking (*Histories*, 3.81):

Ἡμέρας τε ἐπτά, ἃς ἀφικόμενος ὁ Εὐρυμέδων ταῖς ἐξήκοντα ναυσὶ παρέμεινε, Κερκυραῖοι σφῶν αὐτῶν τοὺς ἐχθροὺς δοκοῦντας εἶναι ἐφόνευσον, τὴν μὲν αἰτίαν ἐπιφέροντες τοῖς τὸν δῆμον καταλύουσιν, ἀπέθανον δέ τινες καὶ ἰδίας ἔχθρας ἔνεκα, καὶ ἄλλοι χρημάτων σφίσιν ὀφειλομένων ὑπὸ τῶν λαβόντων· 3.81.5 πᾶσά τε ἰδέα κατέστη θανάτου, καὶ οἷον φιλεῖ ἐν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ γίνεσθαι, οὐδὲν ὅτι οὐ ξυνέβη καὶ ἔτι περαιτέρω. καὶ γὰρ πατὴρ παῖδα ἀπέκτεινε καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἱερῶν ἀπεσπῶντο καὶ πρὸς αὐτοῖς ἐκτείνοντο, οἱ δέ τινες καὶ περιοικοδομηθέντες ἐν τοῦ Διονύσου τῷ ἱερῷ ἀπέθανον. οὕτως ὥμῃ <ή> στάσις προухώρησε, καὶ ἔδοξε μᾶλλον, διότι ἐν τοῖς πρώτη ἐγένετο, ἐπεὶ ὕστερόν γε καὶ πᾶν ὡς εἰπεῖν τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐκινήθη, διαφορῶν οὐσῶν ἐκασταχοῦ τοῖς τε τῶν δήμων προστάταις τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἐπάγεσθαι καὶ τοῖς ὀλίγοις τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους.

And for the seven days together that Eurymedon stayed there with his sixty galleys, the Corcyraeans did nothing but kill such of their city as they took to be their enemies, laying to their charge a practice to have everted the popular government. Amongst whom some were slain upon private hatred and some by their debtors for the money which they had lent them. All forms of death were then seen; and...whatsoever had happened at any time happened also then, and more. For the father slew his son; men were dragged out of the temples and slain hard by; and some immured in the temple of Bacchus died within it. So cruel was this sedition and seemed so the more because it was the first.<sup>12</sup>

This picture of slaughter, unique not because it was the only similar incident, as Thucydides points out, but because it was simply the first, provides yet another perspective on ancient war.

<sup>11</sup> Raaflaub 2014:22

<sup>12</sup> Tr. Thomas Hobbes, David Greene 1989:204

The stench and horror of the battlefield are to be expected. But bringing the sights, sounds, and smells of death into cities, homes, and temples is all the more horrifying. Sacking of cities and massacre of civilians was hardly widespread in the ancient world, but when it did occur, as the excerpt from *Histories* makes clear, the violence would have been extreme. In sum, historical evidence clearly points to a world at constant war, and a type of war nearly unmatched in brutality and violence.

Even giving this general knowledge about a soldier's operational and tactical environment, recreating the subjective experience of an individual living hundreds of years before Christ is no easy task. Given a political culture and society so radically unlike ours, one may wonder how different the experience of war may have been for an individual soldier. Many of the factors that seem to cause combat trauma in modern war seem remarkably absent in ancient conflict. Some authors argue that such factors would make combat trauma either radically different or so rare as to be negligible in its social effects. One proponent of this position, Jason Crowley, examines Athenian culture in particular, seeking to demonstrate that our notions of combat trauma could not apply to the Athenian soldier. He claims that Athenian performative culture, unlike our present post-Christian society, encouraged bravery and violence, and that this cultural environment would cause radically unlike emotional states in soldiers at war from the experience of modern soldiers. He concludes that "the norms and values the Athenian hoplite carried with him into battle were strikingly different from those of the American infantryman, so too was the social environment in which he fought."<sup>13</sup> Not only his social formation, but also the very landscape of battle, Crowley argues, would contribute to the hoplite's immunity from combat trauma. The Athenian soldier would be deployed with those of his own *deme* or tribe, and serve in a cohesive unit of the same friends whose company he would

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<sup>13</sup> Crowley 2014:113

have enjoyed at home. The type of battle in which he fought and the weapons that he used would place the hoplite in control of his surroundings, Crowley argues, making him able to face the enemy by his choice, or if defeated, flee by his choice.

Before I begin to address his claims in detail, it must be admitted that Crowley does make several good arguments regarding the comparatively short distance which Greek soldiers would fight from their homes, the temporal brevity of their expeditions, the paucity of night operations, and the direct nature of phalanx warfare. Exceptions to his claims do, of course, exist. The Sicilian Expedition, for example, led Athenians far from their homes for a long period of time (many of them, of course, never to return). His argument is sufficient to demonstrate, perhaps, that Greek warriors would have suffered combat trauma in smaller percentages than American soldiers. Even if this were the case, however, the percentage of the Athenian population that was traumatized would likely still remain higher than in modern America, given that every citizen was a soldier.<sup>14</sup>

We shall respond to Crowley's last major argument first. Crowley claims that the individual soldier, is, in a sense, the master of his own fate, and is thus less susceptible to combat trauma than the modern soldier. He claims:

Specifically, during main-force encounters, the Athenian hoplite could eliminate the threat he faced from enemy hoplites by closing with and killing them or, if overmatched, he could break contact under the cover of friendly cavalry and light infantry. Indeed, even during a tactical worst-case scenario...the only option available to the hoplite, uncontrolled flight, usually facilitated by the abandonment of the shield, was itself a form of direct action.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I rely on this fact throughout my thesis, and will justify it here. The oath of citizenship, taken by an Athenian at age 18, was framed in military terms. The situation was reversed from our modern way of thought: we think perhaps of becoming soldiers, being citizens by birth; for the Athenians, being a soldier was a societal pre-requisite to becoming a citizen. Military service lasted from age 18 to 60, with the last ten years of that time in reserve status. Desertion, cowardice, and other military infractions were punished with similar penalties as those imposed on thieves and other criminals. (Ridley 1979:511-12)

<sup>15</sup> Crowley 2014:117

These statements simply do not match the realities of hoplite warfare. The Athenian hoplite could do little of his own volition. The Athenian phalanx operated as a unit. The hoplite in the first line of a phalanx has but one choice: to move forward. The entire purpose of a phalanx is to eliminate direct choice and individual heroic action, or at least minimize its importance.<sup>16</sup> One is in complete reliance on those around him. Members at the rear of the phalanx would simply push forward those behind, creating a collective momentum. Nowhere would an individual decision be more difficult to enact. Control of the environment would be impossible. With a heavy helmet obscuring the hoplite's vision and making hearing difficult, seeing anything clearly beyond the foe straight ahead would have been difficult and hearing anything over the din of clashing armor and shields would have likely been impossible. Victor Hanson writes in the following way of the front-line soldiers' experience at the moment of the charge:

Were they capable of either sober reflection on the dangers of the situation, or even a clearheaded sense of the natural instinct to avoid a collision, to such a degree that they might hesitate, bunch up, step back, or run away? When the hoplite was in the final steps of a hundred-yard run, his adrenaline and the laws of motion made continued movement forward more likely than a sudden stop. Besides, his vision and hearing were too poor and he no longer had a clear visual picture of the trouble awaiting him.<sup>17</sup>

If Hanson is correct, once committed to battle, there would be little chance for orderly retreat or individual action for the individual hoplite or the phalanx as a whole.<sup>18</sup> In a situation where the fate of two masses of men is decided in a kind of brutal shoving-match or short range spear duel, there is no individual control whatsoever. One may as well speak of a single train car deciding to abstain from a collision as a single hoplite exercising individual judgment in phalanx warfare.

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<sup>16</sup> Hanson 1989:156

<sup>17</sup> Hanson 155-156

<sup>18</sup> For the "mechanics of hoplite warfare" Crowley curiously references Hanson (among others), who seems to disagree with his position at every turn, as we shall see. See Crowley 2014:124 n. 112.

Even if such a physical possibility existed, the mental state of a hoplite in battle would hardly be conducive to individual decisions to direct action. The sensory overload in those moments would have been horrifying and overwhelming. Hanson speculates as follows:

Sweating in earnest, their vision obscured by the helmet, dust and bodies in motion everywhere, they were captives in confused humanity as hearing, bad to begin with, now was lost entirely amid the noise, much of it coming from the banging of enemy spear tips on their own armor. For the men in the initial three ranks the view of the fighting, then, would be the blurred shapes of the enemy at their face—and at their feet—their entire perception of the world reduced to a few feet of the ground ahead. There was also an increased smell of sweat from the thousands toiling in the sun, the odor of blood and entrails from fresh, open wounds, and the occasional scent of excrement among the fearful or the recently killed—though possibly the sense of smell was dulled along with hearing and vision.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the exact sensations that the hoplite experienced, the range of emotions from the adrenaline rush before and during the onslaught followed by the horror of the initial shock, then the blood-lusty exultation of the pursuing pitted against the abject terror of the pursued form an emotional melee that baffles our description or understanding. The noblest of warriors would be helplessly caught in this mad communal rush before, during, and after the meeting of the two phalanxes. What the soldier might have done was as much out of his control as in it.

To sum up the physical and emotional experience of the hoplite *othismos* as best we can,

Vietnam veteran and classicist Lawrence Tritle writes:

the sights and sounds of this fight—like any battle, ancient or modern—are nearly beyond the comprehension of the inexperienced. The battleground itself would have become...littered with bodies of the wounded, dying, and dead, making it difficult to walk and fight at the same time. Blood and viscera would have made the ground slippery and the air foul. The noise and confusion would have been bewildering and disorienting all at once.<sup>20</sup>

Such a situation is far distant from Crowley's orderly picture of ancient war. Physically and psychologically, the hoplite would be carried along in the general wave of war, no more able to

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<sup>19</sup> Hanson 1989:156

<sup>20</sup> Tritle 2009:60

control his environment or respond to that environment with “direct action” in classical times than can soldiers of more modern times. In Crowley’s “tactical worst-case scenario,” where the “direct action” of flight in terror is the hoplites’ only option, there is again little consolation. The action is a direct one, but that in no way allows the individual to be a free agent who can control his circumstances, thus reducing (as Crowley would argue) his risk of trauma. As Crowley admits, the hoplite in such a circumstance normally has but one choice: to flee for his life.

Crowley’s argument regarding the presence of friends in combat is also unconvincing. As Shay argues in *Achilles in Vietnam*, the death of a close friend is one of the leading factors in causing combat trauma.<sup>21</sup> One need look no further than Achilles’ loss of Patroclus in the *Iliad* to realize that the Greeks knew the devastation that the loss of a close friend could cause. The presence of friends makes the stress of combat easier to bear, of course, but their loss exacerbates the already powerful emotional turmoil of war. A great part of the power of *philia* between soldiers comes from the mutual defense they provide each other in war.<sup>22</sup> The hoplite phalanx is, of course, incredibly dependent on each soldier playing his part for the defense of the whole. If Shay’s experience with Vietnam veterans is in any way indicative of the ancient situation, the bonds of *philia* within the phalanx must have been unimaginably strong. The dissolution of such bonds through death in combat would likely have often caused severe grief and rage, two chief sources of combat trauma. The presence of other friends, no doubt, would have mitigated this trauma, but probably could not have eliminated it.

Perhaps more worrying, however, are Crowley’s claims that the culture of Athens would have eliminated combat trauma. Crowley argues that Athenian culture served to negate certain of

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<sup>21</sup> Shay 1994:49

<sup>22</sup> Following Shay, I refuse to translate the word *philia*, largely because modern friendship, both in the meaning of the word and in practice, has been largely emptied of the real weight of *philia*, which was a bond far stronger than what is now common in friendship in our everyday experience.



the principle factors that lead to combat trauma in modern America, and that the Greeks therefore had no experience with it. Interestingly, it is possible to turn his arguments entirely on their head. Greek culture's outstanding ability to prevent and treat trauma through military organization and culture (which was so effective, Crowley argues, that combat trauma was irrelevant for the Greeks) ought not to demonstrate unfamiliarity with combat trauma, but rather an extreme familiarity with it. One portion of Greek society that mitigated the effects of combat trauma, as I will argue, was Attic tragedy, but as Crowley does indeed point out, a host of societal factors in Athenian society would have served to alleviate the stress of war by lending it cultural expression.

One of these expressions of trauma is found in lyric poetry. This should hardly surprise us; after World War I it was the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves, among others, that exposed "shell shock" for what it was.<sup>23</sup> Their poems revealed sadness and loss that the triumphal narratives of politics often sublimated. Of Greek lyricists, Pindar famously wrote, "war is sweet to the untried; but the veteran – his heart trembles merely at its approach." (Pindar, Fragment 10)<sup>24</sup> Simonides penned the following epigram: "Once war raged: arrows and a rain of blood,/the breasts of men opened like the clouds./No longer are there men. Lifeless stones recall/ them, living, ranked across the dust."<sup>25</sup> The clear and ringing notes of sadness speak to more than his recognition of glorious death: they bear a deep expression of the finality and tragedy of death in war. The inscription on the grave of one Protomachos is more touching still: "Said Protomachos, from his father's arms/His lovely youth withdrawing with each breath:/Timenorides, forever you'll regret/Your dear son's boldness, his disdain for

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<sup>23</sup> For the influence of the First World War on poetry, and that poetry's influence on our outlook, see *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Fussell 1975)

<sup>24</sup> γλυκύ δ' ἀπείρω πόλεμος. πεπειραμένων δέ τις ταρβεῖ προσιόντα νιν καρδία περισσῶς. Tr. Eddie Hoffmann. Text from Stoneman 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Quinn 1996:XXVII

death.”<sup>26</sup> Simonides’ epigrams speak to an understanding of the glory of war, but also an understanding of the cost of war: we shall regret the boldness, the glory of our soldiers, because that boldness leads to their deaths.

For Simonides, death in battle is surely glorious (one need only read his epigram on the Spartan fallen to infer as much)<sup>27</sup> but glory is not the whole of the story. Crowley would ask us to believe that the Greeks understood death in battle not as a premature end but as a happy consummation of life, and that such an attitude toward death precludes combat trauma. The Greeks did indeed view death in battle more positively than we 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans seem to, but the premise fails to capture the whole of the Greek understanding of death. Simonides’ poem in memory of Protomachos describes a glorious death: the very name Protomachos means “first to fight,” or “fore-fighter.” The epigram indicates that death in battle, no matter how glorious, still leaves intense grief with survivors.<sup>28</sup> Simonides’ poetry calls into question Crowley’s undue emphasis on the glorification of death.

Furthermore, death on the battlefield hardly always fits the perfection embodied by Protomachus’ beautiful passing. Archilochus remarks in one fragment how “seven men fell dead when we overtook them at a run, though we the killers are a thousand.”<sup>29</sup> Here we hardly see the glorious death (or the glorious triumph) that Crowley claims was the norm in the Greek view of war. Lest we simply dismiss Archilochus’ view as uncharacteristic of Greek society, the Spartan

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<sup>26</sup> Qinn 1996:XXXIV

<sup>27</sup> Quinn 1996:XXI “Stranger, tell the Spartans we remain/Under their orders, sentinel, on this plain.”

<sup>28</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to do any adequate analysis of Sophocles’ *Antigone* or *Electra*, Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* or *Persians*, or Euripides’ *Trojan Women* in this context, but each play records grief at the death of soldiers, no matter how nobly they died. Antigone might even be said to have an extreme case of what modern psychologists call survivor guilt: she longs for and welcomes death after the death of her brothers. The action of the play, which leaves the dead unburied but buries the living, is typical of the experience of survivor guilt as described by Shay (1994:53) those who experience it, because they can never leave behind the memory of their fallen comrades (i.e., bury the dead) must constantly be pulled towards the dead by their memory.

<sup>29</sup> Miller 1996:4. The event that this fragment describes is subject to debate. A possible translation (“we overtook them with running feet”) would indicate that the men were trampled rather than slain by weapons. This would only heighten the ignominy of their death.

poet Tyrtaios also highlights the difference between the ideal death of tragic nobility and the all too common brutal reality:

To fall and die among the fore-fighters is a beautiful thing for a brave man who is doing battle on behalf of his country...Do battle, then young men, standing firm one beside the other,/check every impulse toward shameful flight or fear, make the spirit within your hearts great and valiant, and do not love life too much as you fight the foe. And the older men, whose knees are no longer nimble,/those you must not abandon in flight, aged as they are; for shameful indeed it is when, fallen among the fore-fighters, an older man lies dead in front of the young ones, his head already white and his beard grizzled, breathing out his valiant spirit in the dust, clutching his bloody genitals in his hands—a sight shameful to look at and worthy of indignation—his body exposed and naked...So let each man hold to his place with legs well apart, feet planted on the ground, biting his lip with his teeth.<sup>30</sup>

Undeniably, Tyrtaios does glorify the death of a young and noble soldier, who has the honor of consummating his life on the field of battle. But Tyrtaios describes another situation so vividly that we cannot help but think that he must have seen it firsthand or often heard stories of such scenes: an old man, clutching a wound in his groin, slowly bleeding out in the dust. Little glory is left in his poetry here: only bitter ugliness and grief. It is to avoid this very real situation that Tyrtaios urges on a youth to stand his ground “with legs well apart, feet planted on the ground, biting his lip with his teeth.” The Greek honor code did seem to form some shield against the horrors of war; but in this case, Tyrtaios’ argument for practicing the code explicitly recognizes the fact that the code is imposed because of the very real horrors of war. The code was a way of mitigating not the horror but the baseness of war. It attempted to wrest beauty from the ugliness of war. It formed a kind of artificial horizon in which soldiers could bravely live and die.<sup>31</sup>

It belongs to the province of poetry to make the ugly sublime. That was the task, I will argue, of the Greek tragic poets.

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<sup>30</sup> Miller 1996:16

<sup>31</sup> The Greeks did have a quite different understanding of death from the modern one. Herodotus *Histories* 1.30 This passage of the *Histories* relates one Greek attitude toward death. Solon counts Telos the Athenian, who dies well in battle, and Cleobus and Biton, who die in their sleep after piously serving their mother and the gods, as outstandingly blessed men.

A brief look at several Greek tragedies also reveals evidence for a Greek understanding of combat trauma. Sophocles' *Ajax* perhaps provides the best example. It tells the story of a great and strong warrior, who, losing a friend and feeling betrayed by his superiors, simply snaps.

When he feels the shame for what he has done, he seems to have no choice but to kill himself.

Brian Doerries describes the context of the play in these terms:

When Achilles died, no one took the news of his loss harder than Ajax. In the days that followed, Ajax naturally expected to receive Achilles' armor—one of the highest combat honors in the Trojan War, as well as a time-honored ritual of mourning.<sup>32</sup>

Ajax does not receive the honor as he expects. The ever-sly Odysseus is able to win the contest for the armor by rigging the rules: the armor will go to the man who can deliver the best speech. Odysseus, of course, takes the prize. A disgruntled Ajax vows revenge against Odysseus and all the judges of the funeral games, but most notably Agamemnon and Menelaus. Athena, driving him mad with blood lust, leads him to butcher and torture a herd of cattle in the place of the Greek generals. When he learns what he has done, his shame drives him mad and he chooses to commit suicide.

The play highlights the most important causes, events, and effects of combat trauma, in such a way that we must conclude that Sophocles, himself a *strategos* in the Athenian military, would have been intimate with these psychological phenomena. Among causes of combat trauma, loss of a friend and experience of war's horrors can lead to simple trauma.<sup>33</sup> Complex trauma combines the preceding factors with betrayal by a superior officer.<sup>34</sup> A military unit becomes a very close-knit community after years of warfare. Relationships between comrades become very close, but relationships between inferior and superior officers develop as well.

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<sup>32</sup> Doerries 2015a:4

<sup>33</sup> Shay 1994:49

<sup>34</sup> Shay 1994:20

These bonds would be all the stronger given that the Greek army units and civil communities were coextensive, as noted above. Whether *philia* characterizes those relationships or not, they provide the ethical justification for a soldier's actions. He fights because he is ordered to fight, and he exonerates his part in killing by identifying with the larger command structure and passing responsibility for his actions up the chain of command.<sup>35</sup> When a commander betrays his subordinate, the whole moral fabric that has been making that soldier's sacrifices and violence intelligible comes unraveled, leaving the soldier alone with a tremendous weight of wrath and guilt.<sup>36</sup> Ajax experiences both causes of complex combat trauma: the death of Achilles, his close friend, and betrayal by his commanders.

Having suffered these standard triggers of combat trauma, Ajax displays the stereotypical symptoms. The event that often cements combat trauma in our psyche is known as the "berserk state," in which a soldier loses rational control and allows wrath and bloodlust to overpower his reason. In this state, a soldier can be far more deadly and effective, if his lack of calculation does not get him killed.<sup>37</sup> Shay argues that the human psyche is radically scarred by having even once entered into this berserk state.<sup>38</sup> After a soldier feels the rush of adrenaline, sensation of power, and release of pent-up anger that characterizes the berserk state, no other experience can provide the same emotional high in the future. Ajax once again fits the standard perfectly: he has suffered irreparable harm by losing control of his mind. The effects of combat trauma are also easy to see in Ajax. His intense shame after the berserk state is a textbook response. Sophocles followed an old tale in his presentation of *Ajax*, but given the accuracy with which he portrays

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<sup>35</sup> Shay 1994:20

<sup>36</sup> In some ways Ajax's descent into trauma is similar to Achilles', beginning with wrath against Agamemnon, and ending in guilt for having allowed Patroklos to die.

<sup>37</sup> Shay has argued that the Berserk state is a particularly violent and brutal type of *aristeia*. Not all *aristeiai* could be considered examples of the Berserk state. However, many of them would likely qualify. Shay identifies several in the *Iliad*, Achilles' being the most notable. Shay 1994:97

<sup>38</sup> Shay 1994:98

the now diagnosable berserk state, no doubt he himself saw hoplites suffer what Ajax suffered and saw them respond similarly.

Lest we consider the story of Ajax too fanciful to relate to the experiences of real Greek soldiers, it must be noted that such excesses of cruelty and brutality, though perhaps not common, are far from unknown even in modern battle. Brian Doerries relates the following incident:

On March 11, 2012, an Army staff sergeant and trained sniper named Robert Bales, a decorated combat veteran on his fourth deployment in nine years, left his base in southern Afghanistan under cover of night, walked into a local village, and went door to door, shooting and stabbing civilians—many of them women and children. He then returned to base and matter-of-factly told his friend what he had done, before walking into another village and slaughtering more civilians. Finally, he walked back to base at dawn, soaked in blood, and reportedly said to fellow soldiers that he thought he'd done "the right thing." All told Bales killed sixteen civilians in two separate attacks, setting many of their bodies ablaze, as boys and girls cowered behind curtains begging for mercy, screaming, "We are children! We are children!" In one particularly harrowing detail, a young survivor—a fourteen-year-old boy—saw Bales enter his family's shed and open fire on their cow.<sup>39</sup>

Bales was indeed a modern Ajax, in his strength as a soldier before his fall, and in the brutality of his fall. Of course his story does not match all of the complexities of the Ajax legend. Of course, notably absent in our accounts of modern incidents are the gods, who, in Ajax' case, help us to exonerate Ajax at least from the baseness of the crime that he commits. In fact, presence of the gods, both cruel and beautiful, seems to serve a double function in the story: first, their actions partially relieve the moral weight from Ajax' crime, second, their beauty elevates a base story of a soldier-gone-mad to a tale of enough significance to interest celestial beings. Each of these functions is an integral part of tragedy.

This tragedy, however, bears a deeper relation to combat trauma than the surface-level one I have identified. Through tragic catharsis, it begins to effect a cure of that trauma. Like most

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<sup>39</sup> Doerries 2015b:6-7.

tragedies of Sophocles, *Ajax* tells a tale that makes the ugly beautiful. Ajax is remembered and defended by his comrades in his death, and even some of his enemies (e.g., Odysseus) remember justice after all. The tragedy insists that in the final account, Ajax was a noble man. Teucer defends his character to Agamemnon with these words:

Oh how quickly we forget. Right after a man dies, gratitude instantly evaporates into a cloud of betrayal. How many times did he put his life on the line for you, shielding you from the enemy attacks... As the flames spread from ship to ship, mighty Hector leaped over the hulls and on to your deck with every intention of taking you down. Tell me! Who saved you that day? Was it some base criminal?<sup>40</sup>

The tragedy argues that Ajax was not a “base criminal.” Rather, Sophocles emphasizes his action as one committed because of excessive *thumos*, in itself a noble quality.<sup>41</sup> In the end, we exonerate Ajax of base guilt, while still facing the horror of his actions. Without this tragic outlook, it is easy to dismiss Ajax as a base criminal. Likewise, it would be easy to forgive and forget the evil of his actions. Both of those approaches are common responses to tragic events in real life. Shay writes of both reactions to soldiers’ actions in Vietnam. On some occasions, superior officers sanctioned brutal killings by awarding medals and citations to the perpetrators, attempting simply to silence the guilty consciences of the men who committed the deeds.<sup>42</sup> Some, on the other hand, assume that the sort of men who perpetrate massacres must have been evil all along.<sup>43</sup> Both of these responses, the moralistic and the dismissive, are decidedly untragic. Only the tragic response allows us to accept both the evil of the action and the nobility

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<sup>40</sup> Doerries 2015b:110

<sup>41</sup> *Thumos* often is translated as “spiritedness.” It characterizes a magnanimous soul that feels strongly. Aristotle lists the thumetic emotions in the *Rhetoric* (1377a31-88b31) anger, calmness, friendship, enmity, fear, confidence, shame and shamelessness, kindness and unkindness, pity, indignation, envy, and emulation. In the ancient understanding, *thumos* could be distinguished from *epithumia* (appetites) and *logos* or *nous* (the reason or mind). Ajax responds to slight with indignation. Slight and indignation, are, for Aristotle, two quintessential aspects of *thumos*. For more on *thumos*, see pg. 48-50.

<sup>42</sup> 1994:4 Shay sites several instances of accidental killings of civilians that were condoned and even praised by officers in an attempt to ease the guilt of the soldiers involved.

<sup>43</sup> Shay 1994:4 Often this latter course of action is even taken by the perpetrator of the action himself; hence the intense guilt experienced by combat soldiers. It is difficult for veterans to see themselves as the same person as they were before the war, for example, because their prewar innocent character fails to jive with what they have become.

of the man who committed it. Holding the nobility of the man and the baseness of the deed in this tension allows us to begin to restore the dignity of the man. If he is indeed noble, he has the capacity to regain that nobility through his response to the baseness of the deed. Through witnessing the tragic narrative, sympathy with the hero can heal a traumatized mind. If my claims above about the nature of the tragic mindset are correct, tragedy also bore a deeper connection to combat trauma through its ability to heal that trauma.

This claim holds true, I will argue, even for tragedies that seem to have little to do with war on the surface. Although I have thus far examined a tragedy that addresses war directly, many Greek tragedies preserve the same theme of noble men and women falling into criminal disaster not by their own evil but because of some *hamartia*. A full examination of *hamartia* will come in my next chapter, but for the moment, we may think of *hamartia* as a disjunction between certain aspects of character in protagonists and the circumstances in which the protagonists find themselves.<sup>44</sup> Thus the Persians meet defeat in Aeschylus' *Persians*, Orestes kills his mother in the *Oresteia*, Oedipus commits incest, and Electra murders her mother. Each of the tragedies connects a noble person to disaster by means of a *hamartia*. Oftentimes the aspect of character that brings about the *hamartia* is not a flaw, but is rather indifferent or even salutary. In *Ajax*, Ajax' flaw seems largely to be the collision of his thumetic character and the unfair circumstances in which he finds himself. Although Antigone rebels excessively against the political order, we tend to sympathize with her rebellion. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus' ruining 'flaw' is his desire to understand the plight of the citizens of Thebes: hardly a flaw at all.<sup>45</sup> Of course Oedipus does act with real hubris, but there is nobility in his hubris, when

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<sup>44</sup> See pp. 40-45

<sup>45</sup> Green and Lattimore 2013:160 I provide the Greek for Jocasta's opinion here, as it becomes a key passage for understanding *Oedipus*: εἰκὴ κράτιστον ζῆν, ὅπως δύναιτό τις. Greek text from Storr 1912.



contrasted with others that ask him to act ignobly and ignore the plight of the Thebans. It is his refusal to “live lightly” as Jocasta puts it, that puts him in harm’s way.<sup>46</sup>

No matter the sort of conflict in which they are engaged, soldiers are shocked out of the ability to live lightly. Soldiers are faced with the sort of decisions that do not allow for simple, surface-level thought according to conventional moral categories. Soldiers are also of a particularly thumetic character – they dare and do great things with great feeling. These circumstances make the warrior the ideal tragic hero, not simply of tragedies that happen to be staged on the field of battle, but even those that take place in the city, far from the terror of war. Not unlike Oedipus’ unrelenting search for truth, soldiers upon their returns often puzzle over old declassified orders or military reports to find out what exactly they might have done in war. Sometimes the knowledge they acquire is far more harmful than their previous ignorance. Shay writes, “returning veterans face a characteristic peril, a risk of dying from the obsession to know the complete and final truth of what they and the enemy did and suffered in their war and why.”<sup>47</sup> Noble soldiers who have faced conflict, whether they experience trauma or not, are all tragic heroes because they are faced with Oedipus’ choice: live lightly or suffer. They choose to suffer. Tragedy’s unique ability to salvage the nobility of the tragic hero would have allowed the soldiers of the Greek audience to salvage their own nobility and proclaim themselves *katharoi*; that is, cleansed, of the guilt of their actions, no matter how horrible those actions were.

We may make this claim with all the more confidence because of the demographics of the participants in the *Dionysia* (the Athenians’ greatest tragic festival). As to the participants, let us begin with the playwrights themselves. Aeschylus was a soldier, and if we may judge by his funeral epitaph, the proudest achievement of his life was not constant victory at Athens’

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<sup>46</sup> Green and Lattimore 2013:130

<sup>47</sup> Shay 2000:87.

tragic festivals, but his feats on the field of Marathon.<sup>48</sup> Sophocles, we know, was elected *strategos* or “general” on two occasions, and, in his youth, sang the paean of victory at Salamis.<sup>49</sup> Military service was universal for Athenian citizens, so at least a large portion of the audience would have been made up of ‘active duty’ soldiers. A large portion of the remainder of the audience would have been made up of combat veterans or future soldiers. The festival began by the ritual entrance of the god Dionysus into the city, born by *ephebes* (youths about to enter into manhood). They had that honor because they had just graduated from Athenian ‘basic training.’<sup>50</sup> The theater was split into sections according to *demes*, which were both units of Athenian social structure and military units. The fact that the units of social division and military chain of command were coextensive further emphasizes the saturation of Athenian society with military life. The basic training graduates of that year (the *ephebes*) would have had their own seating section to preserve their military *esprit de corps* at the tragic festival.<sup>51</sup> In the early stages of the festival, sons whose fathers had died in defense of the *polis* were paraded in hoplite armor, as they too were now ready to join the ranks of the *ephebes* and carry on the proud tradition of their fathers. Perhaps we may imagine all of these military trappings as reminders of the true bent of the tragic performances that followed them. In summary of his description of the military trappings of the City Dionysia, John Winkler writes:

This description may sound more like a West Point graduation ceremony [than our modern experience of theater], but it is important to remember that the *toto caelo* difference which we experience between the military realm and the theatrical, between marching to war and going to a play, did not apply to the City Dionysia. To cite a caricature whose degree of truth will later become apparent, Aristophanes

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<sup>48</sup> Αἰσχύλον Εὐφορίωνος Ἀθηναῖον τόδε κεύθει/μνημα καταφθίμενον πυροφόροιο Γέλας·/ἀλκὴν δ' εὐδόκιμον Μαραθῶνιον ἄλσος ἂν εἶποι/καὶ βαθυχαιτήεις Μῆδος ἐπιστάμενος. “In Gela, rich in wheat, he died, and lies beneath this stone:/Aeschylus the Athenian, son of Euphorion./His valour, tried and proved, the mead of Marathon can tell./The long-haired Persian also, who knows it all too well.” Greek text and translation from Sommerstein 2010. For Aeschylus’ military service, see Havelock 1970:viii.

<sup>49</sup> Havelock 1970:ix

<sup>50</sup> Winkler 1990:28

<sup>51</sup> Winkler 1990:28

presents Aischylos in the *Frogs* defending his plays as a form of martial art: his *Seven Against Thebes* made every man in the audience lust for battle.<sup>52</sup>

While lusting for battle may not sound consonant with my theme of combat trauma, let us remember two points. First, a role of tragedy, as we saw with *Ajax*, was to declare the veteran *katharos*, that is, cleansed of any stain from combat. Such a process of catharsis returns dignity to war in defense of the *polis*. Second, we have here an Aristophanean caricature, rather than the reality. We can imagine that perhaps the “lust for battle” is an exaggeration of the actual feelings of the audience. We can conclude from Winkler’s analysis of the Dionysia, though, that the festival was a political and military event as much as it was an artistic one. Or, more accurately, we could say that such modern distinctions were inoperative: the political, military, and artistic were united in the Athenian outlook, and, indeed, that Aeschylus and Sophocles personified that unity.<sup>53</sup>

Even given the above, to claim that therapy of combat trauma was the explicit and sole purpose of Attic tragedy would perhaps be naïve. I for one, though I have never tasted battle, can still experience a measure of catharsis simply in reading a tragedy. We must bear in mind that our relation to tragedy differs from that of ancient Athenians because we do not experience the plays in the context of a militaristic festival. We can justly concede, though, that tragedy treats human trauma, which, at first glance, seems to far exceed combat trauma in its scope. This concession may seem to undermine the entire purpose of the last twenty pages. Why such emphasis on war trauma if tragedy treats human trauma in general? We may quiet such a suspicion in two ways. First the above analysis does reveal that combat trauma was a particularly salient form of trauma. It was one that not only the tragedies themselves but also

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<sup>52</sup> Winkler 1990:31-32

<sup>53</sup> Of course I mention only two of the three most famous tragedians. The question of Euripides is a complicated one that I do not intend to tackle here.

rituals of the entire City Dionysia sought to address.<sup>54</sup> Second, there is that in war and in war trauma that summarizes and distills human experience like few other situations. J. Glen Gray, philosopher and veteran of World War II, wrote that those who lived through the experience of battle “knew a quality of excitement scarcely experienced before or since.” He continues,

Fear may have been the dominant feature of such excitement; rarely was it the only ingredient. In such an emotional situation there is often a surge of vitality and a glimpse of potentialities, of what we really are or have been or might become, as fleeting as it is genuine...Inhuman cruelty can give way to superhuman kindness. Inhibitions vanish, and people are reduced to their essence...Again and again in moments of this kind I was as much inspired by the nobility of some of my fellows as appalled by the animality of others, or, more exactly, by both qualities in the same person. The average degree, which we commonly know in peacetime, conceals as much as it reveals about the human creature.<sup>55</sup>

We have often heard the maxim that war reveals men at their best and worst. Gray takes the saying a step further: war reveals human beings as human beings. Here we may consider the aphorism of Herakleitos that “war is father of all and of all things the king: as gods it reveals some, others as men, as free it makes some, and some as slaves.”<sup>56</sup> For Aristotle, war is so fundamental to human nature that natural human virtues are best described in the context of a phalanx.<sup>57</sup> The uncomfortable truth to which Herakleitos, Aristotle, and Gray attest is that war is somehow fundamentally bound up in our humanity, or perhaps, humanity is somehow caught up in war. In short, drawing a distinction between war trauma and ‘human trauma’ seeks to separate what nature keeps together.

I do not seek, though, to give too privileged a position to combat trauma. An argument perhaps could be made that every sort of trauma sums up the human condition. I certainly do not

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<sup>54</sup> My language remains intentionally vague here. Because the exact way that the tragedies ‘addressed’ trauma is the argument of my whole paper, it would be premature to provide any formulation that sought greater precision at this point.

<sup>55</sup> Gray 1998:14-15

<sup>56</sup> πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πᾶτηρ ἐστὶ, πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς, καὶ τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς ἔδειξε τοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώπους, τοὺς μὲν δούλους ἐποίησε τοὺς δὲ ἐλευθέρους. Greek text from Kirk, Raven, Schofield 1983:193; tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>57</sup> I refer to the virtue of courage. See *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1115a7-b8

want to deny the dignity of trauma resulting from domestic violence, sexual assault, or any of the other host of ways that human beings do violence to their humanity. As Euripides has Dionysus say in his *Bacchae*, “the dignity of these humans is to weep.” Weeping and suffering, if accepted nobly, lends dignity to the sufferer, no matter the cause of that suffering. This paper follows a certain strain of human suffering through Attic tragedy.<sup>58</sup> In the course of this paper, it will become clear that following this particular strain of suffering allows us to see certain elements of tragedy very clearly. The previous analysis of the fundamental status of war in classical culture generally and in the Athenian tragic festivals in particular lends credibility to this approach. No ancient source allows us to address the fundamental aspects of tragedy better than Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where Aristotle presents an analysis of tragedy in detail, putting catharsis, the cleansing of disorders in the soul, at its center. Turning first to that source and then to the broader Aristotelian corpus, I will argue that catharsis can be understood as treatment of psychological trauma. By the end of my thesis, I will present a theory as to how this catharsis functioned in Attic tragedy.

### Aristotle’s *Poetics*

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<sup>58</sup> Other types of trauma or emotional pain could be followed. Doerries (2015b), for example, makes a compelling case that *Prometheus Bound* was intended to address the suffering of prisoners. Combat, though, seems to be the most prevalent source of trauma in tragedy.

Among the ancient sources, Aristotle's *Poetics* provides us with the most complete account of the nature and effects of tragedy.<sup>59</sup> Thus, it will be necessary to provide a summary account of the *Poetics* in order to guide a final interpretation of catharsis based in the relation between tragedy and trauma discussed above. This chapter analyzes key terms in the *Poetics* such as *mimesis*, *muthos*, *hamartia*, *peripateia*, and *anagnorisis* in order to analyze the internal workings of a tragedy out of which catharsis arises. After analyzing these parts of tragedy in turn, the final argument of the chapter establishes that, according to Aristotle, catharsis is the end of tragedy.

Aristotle begins his work addressing the most basic aspect of the issue at hand: the nature of art. In the most general terms, Aristotle describes art as a *technē* – a craft or skill. It surpasses the particular nature of experience, and is based on knowledge of the causes that make the *technē* cause the desired outcome.<sup>60</sup> Thus it treats reality in such a way as to reflect it as an object of knowledge, formed of knowable causes and effects, rather than as an episodic sequence of unconnected things. In short, it treats the world as if made of discernable wholes, rather than mere heaps of things.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Before I begin my analysis of the work, I must note one preliminary point. It is possible to become caught up in a question as to whether the *Poetics* is a prescriptive or descriptive work; that is, whether it is a manual for tragedies or simply a summary of the way tragedies happen to be written. If taken as pure description, it would seem inadequate at times, and if as prescriptive, it would lack any substantive relation to the tragic *corpus*, except in accidental cases when Sophocles' dramas happened to match Aristotle's guidelines. My understanding is that it does a little bit of both: its analysis does not perfectly match every tragedy in the corpus, but it does reveal important characteristics about the underlying structure and the purpose of tragedy that are not only prescriptive, but can also be found in the tragic corpus. Ultimately, as the analysis in my chapter will reveal, I treat the *Poetics* as a philosophical text. Like much of Aristotle's philosophy, I believe it begins with an honest apprehension of the relevant phenomena. Thus, although it distills the essence of tragedy in such a way that certain extant tragedies seem to fall outside its description, as a general rule, it will provide a fruitful interpretive lens for tragedy as it was practiced in fifth century Athens. Carnes Lord concurs on this point (1982:173). While a thorough defense of this position is not practicable in this thesis, charitable readers will accept this assumption for the sake of argument, and if they find that my argument reveals worthy fruits, will perhaps be willing to trust the validity of my assumption.

<sup>60</sup> For the complete classification of the several types of knowing, see *Metaphysics* Book I. For *technē*, see 981a-b.

<sup>61</sup> Not all things are equally objects of knowledge. Plato famously presented a divided line, above it things are knowable, below it, things are not similarly knowable. Aristotle, of course, differs from this interpretation, but for him as for Plato, certain things are more knowable than others. Only things that occur in such a way that they are

For Aristotle, *techne* refers primarily to the craft that produces a thing, although, as in the English word “art” or “craft” it can refer to both the faculty of producing and the production itself. Nevertheless, the focus of the *Poetics* is on the faculty of producing, the poetry that is produced, and that poetry’s effect on its audience. Hence Aristotle’s concept of art is primarily dynamic.<sup>62</sup> As a *techne*, poetry is as much the inspiration, writing, and reception of the poem as it is the words of the poem itself.

Rather than dividing arts into ‘fine arts’ and ‘crafts’ or ‘skills’ as is done in modern times, Aristotle separates the arts into essentially two categories; imitative and non-imitative arts.<sup>63</sup> Imitation may be the best translation among English alternatives for the meaning-laden Greek term *mimesis*, but it remains impoverished of that word’s rich and ambiguous connotations. The disparity in meaning is best demonstrated by Aristotle’s claim that music is the most mimetic of all the arts. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1447a14) Clearly music, barring some exceptions, cannot simply imitate natural sounds. Beethoven’s *Eroica* may not imitate the visual or auditory perception of a hero, but the entire piece, in Aristotle’s view, must somehow imitate what it is to be heroic. If *mimesis* were pure imitation, then realistic visual arts, not music, would be the most perfectly mimetic art: it captures things ‘as they are.’ *Mimesis* must supersede basic copying of material things. Perhaps re-presentation is a better translation: Aristotle’s notion of *mimesis* implies that the object of the *mimesis* is presented again to the audience for their edification or enjoyment.

In order to establish what Aristotle might mean by his claims about *mimesis*, it is necessary to pay closer attention to the text of the *Poetics* itself. Near the very opening of the

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necessary or probable can be really known, thus “poetry is more philosophical than history” because, like philosophy, it deals with discreet entities. Philosophy speaks of substances, poetry of actions. See *Poetics* 1450b30.

<sup>62</sup> Tatarzewicz 1970:140

<sup>63</sup> Tatarzewicz 1970:141

work, Aristotle establishes the importance of *mimesis* to the entirety of the work. He claims, “epic poetry, poetry of tragedy, so also comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most of flute-playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, *mimesis*.” (*Poetics* 1447a14)<sup>64</sup> Aristotle goes on to imply, naturally, that painters are also practitioners of imitative art. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1447a19) His treatment of painting is brief; perhaps in painting the meaning of *mimesis* is too obscured by that art’s close visual relationship to particular material things. He primarily addresses a different means of imitation: rhythm, language, and harmony. He writes, “such harmony together with rhythm alone work out (*mimesis*) in flute-playing and lyre-playing...”<sup>65</sup> (Aristotle *Poetics* 1447a26)<sup>66</sup> Two things can be established about the nature of *mimesis* from this passage: *mimesis* can represent particular actions or objects by mere copying, but it also carries a deeper sense that goes beyond mere copying.

Aristotle states explicitly in the next section of the *Poetics* that *mimesis* does not mean simply imitation of objects as they appear:

ἐπεὶ δὲ μιμοῦνται οἱ μιμούμενοι πράττοντας, ἀνάγκη δὲ τούτους ἢ σπουδαίους ἢ φαύλους εἶναι... ἤτοι βελτίονας ἢ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἢ χείρονας ἢ καὶ τοιούτους, ὥσπερ οἱ γραφεῖς... καὶ γὰρ ἐν ὀρχήσει καὶ αὐλήσει καὶ κιθαρίσει ἔστι γενέσθαι ταύτας τὰς ἀνομοιότητας... (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448a8-12)

Since then the men represented are represented acting, it is necessary that these are either earnest or base...being written as either better, worse, or just the same as us...and even in dancing and aulos-playing and lyre playing it is possible that these irregularities happen.<sup>67</sup>

Referring to poetry and prose here, Aristotle indicates that all mimetic art does not simply show the appearances of things, as noted above. It not only imitates but also creates; hence, the word that once referred to all creative art and forms the root of our word for poetry (ποιήσις) stems

<sup>64</sup> ἐποποιία δὲ καὶ ἡ τῆς τραγωδίας ποιήσις ἔτι δὲ κωμωδία καὶ ἡ διθυραμβοποιητικὴ καὶ τῆς αὐλητικῆς ἡ πλείστη καὶ κιθαριστικῆς πᾶσαι τυγχάνουσιν οὔσαι μιμήσεις τὸ σύνολον Tr. Eddie Hoffmann. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Richard McKeon’s *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (McKeon 1941) The Greek text of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, unless otherwise noted, comes from *Aristotle’s Ars Poetica* (R. Kassel 1966)

<sup>65</sup> Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>66</sup> οἶον ἁρμονία μὲν καὶ ῥυθμῷ χρώμεναι μόνον ἢ τε αὐλητικὴ καὶ ἡ κιθαριστικὴ...

<sup>67</sup> Tr. Eddie Hoffmann



from the verb “to make” (ποιέω). By the act of making, the poet is imitating something in nature.

In the *Physics*, Aristotle writes of *techne* in general:

τὸ δὲ τῶν Ἑλλήνων γένος, ὥσπερ μεσεύει κατὰ [30] τοὺς τόπους, οὕτως ἀμφοῖν μετέχει. καὶ γὰρ ἔνθυμον καὶ διανοητικόν ἐστίν· διόπερ ἐλεύθερόν τε διατελεῖ καὶ βέλτιστα πολιτευόμενον καὶ δυνάμενον ἄρχειν πάντων, μιᾶς τυγχάνον πολιτείας.<sup>68</sup>  
(Aristotle *Physics* 199a10-15)

“if things made by nature were made also by art, they would come to be in the same way as by nature. Each step then in the series is for the sake of the next; and generally art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her.”

An imitation (*mimesis*) is thus a making (*poiesis*) that both re-presents and improves upon events in nature. The *mimesis* improves upon nature because it can present the natural thing to us more clearly than it appears in nature. It does this through the clarity with which a *mimesis* can represent the formal structure of a thing, so that it can be an object of knowledge. This, once again, is why poetry is more philosophical than history, for Aristotle: history, the investigation of events as they happen in nature, can be improved upon by re-presenting those events through *poiesis*. In so doing, poetry can speak more generally than history, which gets caught up too narrowly, in Aristotle’s account, in specific events.

Poetry accomplishes this task through the *muthos*, or the plot. The essence of poetry, Aristotle writes, is the plot. Characters and language can enhance the force of the plot, but the plot remains at the center of a work. The plot remains central: “it is set down by us that tragedy is a *mimesis* of a whole and completed action having a certain magnitude...” (Aristotle *Poetics* 1450b24)<sup>69</sup> The plot’s beginning, middle, and end give the act form and shape; they define the shape (μόρφη) and “look” (εἶδος) of the story.<sup>70</sup> Here re-presentation improves upon nature: we

<sup>68</sup> Greek text of the *Physics* from *Aristotelis Physica* (Ross 1950). Tr. McKeon 1941.

<sup>69</sup> κεῖται δὴ ἡμῖν τὴν τραγωδίαν τελείας καὶ ὅλης πράξεως εἶναι μίμησιν ἐχούσης τι μέγεθος:

<sup>70</sup> These two terms are often both translated as “form,” a translation as concealing as it is revealing.

cannot see the beginnings, middles, and endings of actions in the real world.<sup>71</sup> This is especially true in those actions most intimate to us: while living our life, we will never see its end, we cannot remember its beginning, and hence, we cannot discover its middle. One can only see those formal structures in a human life, if they exist, from the outside. Aristotle writes:

ὅλον δέ ἐστιν τὸ ἔχον ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσον καὶ τελευτήν. ἀρχὴ δέ ἐστιν ὃ αὐτὸ μὲν μὴ ἐξ ἀνάγκης μετ' ἄλλο ἐστίν, μετ' ἐκεῖνο δ' ἕτερον πέφυκεν εἶναι ἢ γίνεσθαι: τελευτὴ δὲ τοῦναντίον ὃ αὐτὸ μὲν μετ' ἄλλο πέφυκεν εἶναι ἢ [30] ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ, μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο ἄλλο οὐδέν: μέσον δὲ ὃ καὶ αὐτὸ μετ' ἄλλο καὶ μετ' ἐκεῖνο ἕτερον. δεῖ ἄρα τοὺς συνεστῶτας εὖ μύθους μῆθ' ὁπόθεν ἔτυχεν ἄρχεσθαι μῆθ' ὅπου ἔτυχε τελευτᾶν, ἀλλὰ κεχρηῆσθαι ταῖς εἰρημέναις ιδέαις. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b25-35)

But a whole is a thing having a beginning, and a middle, and an end. A beginning is what is itself not from necessity after another thing, and after that another thing by nature is or comes to be. But an end, oppositely, is what by nature itself comes to be after another thing, from necessity or in the most part, after this is no other thing. But a middle is what both after another thing and another is after it. It is necessary that plots standing together well neither happen to begin after something nor happen to end wherever, but to use the aforesaid ideas.<sup>72</sup>

This laborious description of the trajectory of the plot is necessary precisely because events in history have no clear beginnings, middles, or ends. They form part of a long and oftentimes indiscernible string of causes and human actors that we cannot make out. Poetry is both a *poiesis* and a *mimesis* precisely because it creatively imposes formal structures on individual events (by means of the plot) where nature may not have placed them. Aristotle also emphasizes the proper length of a plot, writing, “and indeed it is necessary to have a limit on the plot, and that this is easily remembered.” (*Poetics* 1451a5)<sup>73</sup> This allows the entire plot to be viewed by the limited human memory as a single entity with a single aspect.

<sup>71</sup> One need only read Herodotus' *Histories* to acquiesce that a historian has a difficult time establishing the event that forms the beginning, middle, and end of his story. To find a beginning of a relatively brief conflict between Persia and Greece, Herodotus reaches back to the mythic past. One could well argue that his story has no end, but that the events he describes naturally lead to the Peloponnesian War, which causes further upheavals, etc. History gives us no neat beginnings, middles, or endings.

<sup>72</sup> Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>73</sup> καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν μύθων ἔχειν μὲν μῆκος, τοῦτο δὲ εὐμνημόνευτον εἶναι.

Moreover, the plot is not some arbitrary compilation of events, nor does it take its boundary from one period of time, or from the deeds of one man. The plot sums up a single action (πράξις in the Greek). This action is unified by necessity or probability. Aristotle sums up his teaching by saying, “But it is clear from what was said that the work of a poet is not to speak of not the things having happened, but the sort of things which might happen and the things able to happen according to seeming or necessity.” (*Poetics* 1451a38)<sup>74</sup> Of plots, Aristotle writes, the worst are those that establish no necessary connection between things. He claims, “of simple plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I say that a plot is episodic in which the episodes are after one another neither in seeming nor by necessity.” (*Poetics* 1451b34)<sup>75</sup> In other words, the plot must form a unity: a whole, rather than a heap.

To summarize, as a *mimesis* the plot (*muthos*) re-presents the action (*praxis*). It is the intelligible element of the story that renders it as a whole. Aristotle makes this argument clear in his treatment of tragedy. Aristotle writes that “For tragedy is a *mimesis* not of men but of actions and of life. Happiness and misery is in action; and the end is a certain action, not a quality.” (*Poetics* 1450a15)<sup>76</sup> Poetry is an imitation in words of the actions that form the ends of life. It does imitate characters and things, but these appear in tragedy primarily for the sake of the plot and action (*muthos* and *praxis*) and are incidental rather than essential to the story. Aristotle insists that “is an imitation of action, and mostly on account of it (action), of the men acting.” (*Poetics* 1450b3)<sup>77</sup> Other elements of the story are even less essential. Thought and diction are

<sup>74</sup> φανερόν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>75</sup> τῶν δὲ ἀπλῶν μύθων καὶ πράξεων αἱ ἐπεισοδιώδεις εἰσὶν χεῖριςται: λέγω δ’ ἐπεισοδιώδη μῦθον ἐν ᾧ τὰ ἐπεισόδια μετ’ ἄλληλα οὐτ’ εἰκὸς οὐτ’ ἀνάγκη εἶναι. Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>76</sup> ἡ γὰρ τραγῳδία μίμησις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεων καὶ βίου [καὶ εὐδαιμονία καὶ κακοδαιμονία ἐν πράξει ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ τέλος πράξις τις ἐστίν, οὐ ποιότης; Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>77</sup> ἔστιν τε μίμησις πράξεως καὶ διὰ ταύτην μάλιστα τῶν πραττόντων. Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

also not as central to a story as plot; spectacle is least essential of all. (*Poetics* 1450b) The details of the story happen as a result of causes; Aristotle insists:

ταῦτα δὲ δεῖ γίνεσθαι ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς συστάσεως τοῦ μύθου, ὥστε ἐκ τῶν προγεγενημένων συμβαίνειν ἢ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς γίνεσθαι ταῦτα: διαφέρει γὰρ πολὺ τὸ γίνεσθαι τάδε διὰ τάδε ἢ μετὰ τάδε. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a18-21)

“it is necessary that these things come to be from the standing-together of the plot, such that these things happen to throw together from the things having been brought into being either from necessity or according to seeming: for it differs greatly, what things are on account of these things and the things after these things.”<sup>78</sup>

That the poem is connected by causes that lead it from a definite beginning to a definite ending ensures that it re-presents one discreet action in full.

Tragedy does not imitate an action by description of that particular action, rather it imitates the action by re-presentation of the same kind of action. Silvia Carli writes that in Aristotle’s view, “like the lover of wisdom, the maker of plots has the capacity to see the determinate formal structures that make our world and its transformations intelligible.”<sup>79</sup>

Aristotle writes that poetry speaks in universal statements “But it is according to the whole, by which I mean what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry, though it fixes proper names to the characters...” (*Poetics* 1451b7-8)<sup>80</sup>

Aristotle regards history, which he opposes to poetry, not as recording broad themes and causes in the succession of events of the world, but an investigation of all of the things that happened in a particular time, or a particular place, or to a particular man. All of these things form the worst sort of plots and it is in contrast with these qualities that Aristotle says that poetry is more philosophical than history. Re-presenting human action by poetic *mimesis* has the effect of

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<sup>78</sup> Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

<sup>79</sup> Carli 2010:333

<sup>80</sup> ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἡ ποίησις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη. Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

forming a mental grasp of an event in the mind such that there is a singular aspect of the event.

Silvia Carli describes Aristotle's position in these terms:

Poetry...depicts a fully determined object, that is to say, an action, which is a whole with a beginning, a middle and an end, because *mimesis* is a representation not of human events, but rather their nature (*physis*), understood as form (*eidos*), and that for the sake of which (*to hou katholou*.)<sup>81</sup>

Mimetic *poiesis* takes an event, shears the non-essentials from it, and presents it to the mind in a clarified form. Thus Aeschylus' *Persians* portrays the hubris of Xerxes and all of the Persian Wars in one grand plot; but it also presents all hubristic actions of the same sort. Aristotle makes clear that historical actions, like Xerxes' invasion of Greece, can be fit to be re-presented as unities. Tragedy, he writes, can be written about historical events, that which has happened is manifestly possible....” (*Poetics* 1452a8) “In short, poetry imitates reality. It can give a clearer vision of an event than experience of the event itself might perhaps have given by presenting the bare essence of the event, either with the same incidental qualities or others attached to the plot.

There are two valid types of plots for Aristotle: the simple and the complex. Aristotle writes,

εἰσὶ δὲ τῶν μύθων οἱ μὲν ἀπλοῖ οἱ δὲ πεπλεγμένοι· καὶ γὰρ αἱ πράξεις ὧν μιμήσεις... λέγω δὲ ἀπλὴν μὲν πρᾶξιν ἣς γινομένης ὥσπερ ὥρισται συνεχοῦς καὶ μιᾶς ἄνευ περιπετείας ἢ ἀναγνωρισμοῦ ἢ μετάβασις γίνεται, πεπλεγμένην δὲ ἐξ ἣς μετὰ ἀναγνωρισμοῦ ἢ περιπετείας ἢ ἀμφοῖν ἢ μετάβασις ἐστίν. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a15-20)

Of plots, there are, on the one hand, the simple, and on the other, the complex. I call the action preceding in the way defined simple as one continuous whole, when the change in the hero's fortunes takes place without *peripateia* or *anagnorisis*; and complex, when it involves one or the other, or both.<sup>82</sup>

Here Aristotle gives us two of the plot's elements: *peripateia* and *anagnorisis*. These elements are in turn shaped by the *harmartia*. If the plot is simple, the action of the whole plot is simply driven by *hamartia*. What then is *hamartia*? This in itself is a question of some debate.

<sup>81</sup> Carli 2010:305

<sup>82</sup> Tr. Eddie Hoffmann

Literally, the word should be translated as “a missing of the mark.” A long-prevailing view held that *hamartia* could simply be translated as “sin” (as it is in the New Testament). This view would make the tragic action of Greek drama driven by just punishment for violation of moral law.<sup>83</sup> While a case could be made that offense against the gods is a common theme of Attic tragedy, the notion of moral law, so prevalent in our own culture, is an inheritance we derive from Jerusalem rather than Athens.<sup>84</sup> Most scholarship now takes *hamartia* to mean error in judgment.<sup>85</sup> According to this view, the tragic hero makes an error in judgment that causes his fortunes to change, (peripeteia) and the tragedy is complete in his recognition of that change. This very standard interpretation, however, robs the *Poetics* of any real depth or richness.<sup>86</sup> When we place a tragic hero in the center of the drama, *hamartia* simply cannot mean a mistake of fact if we are to preserve any depth or richness of meaning in tragedy. It is then necessary to turn to the larger events of the plot to provide a means to avoid these unacceptable alternatives.

The change of fortunes, at first glance, seems a simpler nut to crack. A tragic hero experiences a change in fortunes, the recognition of which causes him insurmountable tragedy. As we saw above, however, this change of fortunes, if driven by *hamartia* in the tragic hero, forces us either to interpret *hamartia* as sin, or to interpret it as mistake of fact. The first interpretation seems to reduce tragedy to trite moral fairy-tales, the second to sadistically humorous stories of mistaken judgment. Both alternatives, needless to say, are unacceptable, and do not, as we shall see, match a careful reading of *Oedipus*, which I shall choose to analyze following Aristotle’s example. John Jones answers this problem by an unconventional choice:

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<sup>83</sup> For a very careful analysis and rejection of this interpretation, see Nancy Sherman “*Hamartia* and Virtue” in A.O. Rorty’s *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* pp. 177-196.

<sup>84</sup> Arguably, the theme of the *Oresteia*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus* cycle, and the list goes on.

<sup>85</sup> I treat this theory somewhat summarily in the analysis that follows for the sake of brevity. For a more full discussion, again see Sherman 1992:179.

<sup>86</sup> A man flips a lit cigarette into a puddle. The puddle is a puddle of spilled gasoline, though the man thinks it is water. The man is consumed in flames. His *hamartia* or error of judgment caused a change in our hero’s fortunes. This is not the stuff of *tragoedia*.

against the tradition of interpretation, he chooses to claim that there is no tragic hero in Aristotelian drama, and that the change in fortunes are therefore not a change in the fortunes of a single man, but simply in the nature of the situation in which the tragedy occurs. This change in fortunes happens to foul the life of a man who happens to be the center of the tragedy. Jones very accurately points to the fact that oftentimes, *hamartia* simply cannot be found in the tragic hero of actual Greek drama.

The same hero who has been imposed on the *Poetics* is looked for in the plays themselves, and he is found there of course: and sometimes, by a nice irony, Aristotle incurs blame for failing to fit his theory to the dramatic facts. Antigone, *pace* Hegel, is innocent (the commentators protest) of *hamartia*. Oedipus's *hamartia* does not cause his downfall. Philoctetes does not fall, he rises.<sup>87</sup>

Jones uses his quite logical sequence of argumentation to reject utterly the notion of the tragic hero. Though I respect the validity of his argument, even a cursory examination of the *Poetics*, in my estimation, contradicts his conclusion.

When analyzing the plot, Aristotle focuses it on the fortunes of a single character.<sup>88</sup>

Aristotle writes:

ὁ μεταξὺ ἄρα τούτων λοιπός. ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία...ἀνάγκη ἄρα τὸν καλῶς ἔχοντα μῦθον ἀπλοῦν εἶναι μᾶλλον ἢ διπλοῦν, ὥσπερ τινὲς φασι, καὶ μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας ἀλλὰ τοῦναντίον ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μὴ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλην ἢ οἴου εἶρηται ἢ βελτίονος μᾶλλον ἢ χείρονος. (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453a6-18)

There remains then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment (*hamartia*)...the change in the hero's fortunes must not be from misery to happiness...and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error (*hamartia*) on his part, the man being either such as we have described, or better, not worse, than that.

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<sup>87</sup> Jones 1962:13

<sup>88</sup> Sometimes it seems the tragedies seem to simultaneously possess several candidates for tragic hero, as in Antigone. However, this is immaterial, as long as we may find one or several tragic hero or heroes in the drama.

Though, as Jones correctly notes, the word “hero” appears nowhere in the *Poetics*, what does indeed appear is a man whose action is the action of the drama.<sup>89</sup> There is no room for a rejection of the tragic hero in the *Poetics*. Aristotle goes on to write:

ἔστι δὲ περιπέτεια μὲν ἢ εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον τῶν πραττομένων μεταβολὴ καθάπερ εἴρηται, καὶ τοῦτο δὲ ὥσπερ λέγομεν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ ἀναγκαῖον, οἷον ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι ἐλθὼν ὡς εὐφρανῶν τὸν Οἰδίπου καὶ ἀπαλλάξων τοῦ πρὸς τὴν μητέρα φόβου, δηλώσας ὅς ἦν, τοῦναντίον ἐποίησεν: (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a20-25)

A peripety (*peripateia*) is the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events; as it is for instance in *Oedipus*: here the opposite state of things is produced by the messenger, who, coming to gladden Oedipus and to remove his fears as to his mother, reveals the secret of his birth.

The change of fortunes in *Oedipus*, to use Aristotle’s example, is precisely a change in Oedipus’ fortunes. The surrounding circumstances have not changed at all; in Oedipus, the *peripateia* is a subjective one; it is a *peripateia* bound up with *anagnorisis* (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a20). There is a single man whose action forms the action of the drama. Gerald Else concurs with my analysis:

Confusion on this point has been at the root of many misunderstandings of Aristotle. It has misled John Jones, for example, to the absurd statement that there is no such thing as the tragic hero in the *Poetics*. What Jones means here is something quite different: there is no intimate, inward personality of modern type at the core of Aristotle’s *ethos*.<sup>90</sup>

This however, is not precisely what Jones argues. Else captures one element of Jones’s argument: his critique of the modern notion of character anachronistically applied to Sophoclean characters, but he dismisses a real problem that arises with present misunderstandings of *hamartia* and *peripateia* and locates those problems in the problem of character, separated from

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<sup>89</sup> While Aristotle does not use the words “tragic hero,” he describes a man of a certain character whose fall from good to bad fortune forms the center of the action of the plot. Without venturing an educated opinion on the exact role of the tragic hero in the *Poetics* or in the tragic corpus, I use the term as shorthand for Aristotle’s phrase (man of an intermediate character, or slightly better than the average; see the quotation above) in the simplest way possible. For the purposes of my argument, the tragic hero is simply the protagonist of a tragedy. I follow Aristotle in placing more emphasis on analysis of the plot and action rather than the characters involved. For a treatment of the tragic hero most consonant with my own understanding of him, see Lord 1982:165-173. Although I differ with Else on other points, his discussion of the tragic hero agrees with my analysis as well (Else 1986:166 and following).

<sup>90</sup> Else 1986:116



those other issues. Rather than thus dodging the issue, we ought to take Jones' very good (though mistaken) argument at what it is worth: the interpretation of *peripateia* as a ruining change in the hero's fortunes as a result of his own mistake of fact results in a quite shallow theory of poetry, one we would hardly expect from Aristotle. If we accept the validity of the argument but reject the truth of the conclusion, there must be some error in the premises. Clearly what is necessary is not another dodging of the issue but a new theory of *hamartia*, one that preserves the tragic hero, but does not make tragedy a shallow and trite affair.

Unfortunately, we shall have to approach this new understanding of *hamartia* in a roundabout way (one may almost say that my argument will use *peripateia*) by means of a discussion of *anagnorisis*. Aristotle defines *anagnorisis* as broadly as possible. It is simply "a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune." (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a30)<sup>91</sup> Aristotle uses several simple discoveries as examples. "The discovery, then, being of persons, it may be of one party only to the other, the latter being already known; or both the parties may have to discover themselves." (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452b5)<sup>92</sup> Here, Aristotle cites the simple *anagnorisis* of Orestes and Iphigenia in *Iphigenia*. However, these simpler and specific examples should not detract from the earlier general definition that allows *anagnorisis* to be any coming to knowledge from ignorance. Aristotle writes, "The finest form of discovery is one attended by peripeties, like that in *Oedipus*." This form of *anagnorisis* is "most directly connected with the plot and the action of the piece..." (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a30)<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> ἀναγνώρισις δέ, ὥσπερ καὶ τοῦνομα σημαίνει, ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν μεταβολή, ἢ εἰς φιλίαν ἢ εἰς ἔχθραν, τῶν πρὸς εὐτυχίαν ἢ δυστυχίαν ὀρισμένων:

<sup>92</sup> ἐπεὶ δὴ ἡ ἀναγνώρισις τινῶν ἐστὶν ἀναγνώρισις, αἱ μὲν εἰσι θατέρου πρὸς τὸν ἕτερον μόνον, ὅταν ἡ δῆλος ἄτερος τίς ἐστιν, ὅτε δὲ ἀμφοτέρους δεῖ ἀναγνώρισαι

<sup>93</sup> καλλίστη δὲ ἀναγνώρισις, ὅταν ἅμα περιπετεία γένηται, οἷον ἔχει ἡ ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι. εἰσὶν μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλαι ἀναγνώρισεις: καὶ γὰρ πρὸς ἄνυσχα καὶ τὰ τυχόντα ἐστὶν ὥσπερ εἴρηται συμβαίνει καὶ εἰ πέπραγέ τις ἢ μὴ πέπραγεν ἐστὶν ἀναγνώρισαι.

In each of these cases, Aristotle uses quite obvious examples to explain what he means by *anagnorisis*. On the other hand, however, we must not limit ourselves to his simpler examples, given the definition he lists above that is far broader; simply coming to a knowledge that one did not before possess.

I therefore make the case that there can be a deeper sort of *anagnorisis* than the simple discovery of fact. Let us take Oedipus' *anagnorisis* as our starting point. Without providing a complete interpretation of the play, we can still make some claims regarding *anagnorisis* that would hold true in nearly any reading of the work. Oedipus, of course, discovers that the man he had killed at the crossroads was his father. He also discovered that the woman by whom he had fathered Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene was his mother. However, he discovers something deeper as well. Consider what he says to Tiresias:

Yet solving the riddle then was a prophet's task, and plainly you had no such gift of prophecy from birds nor otherwise from any god to glean a word of knowledge. But I came, Oedipus, who know nothing, and I stopped her. I solved the riddle by my wit alone.<sup>94</sup>

The gist of Oedipus' position is that his wit, his knowledge, is enough to solve his problems, and so far, his statement holds true: Oedipus has saved himself and Thebes by his cleverness alone.

As he says later:

Ah! Ah! O dear Jocasta, why should one look to the Pythian hearth? Why should one look to the birds screaming overhead? They prophesied that I should kill my father! But he's dead...and I stand here who never laid a hand on spear against him...<sup>95</sup>

When all has come to fulfillment, Oedipus realizes his mistake about the gods: "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo, that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion."<sup>96</sup> Oedipus learns whom he killed at the crossroads and with whom he lay in the chamber of Laius, no doubt, but

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<sup>94</sup> Greene and Lattimore 2013:134

<sup>95</sup> Greene and Lattimore 2013:160

<sup>96</sup> Greene and Lattimore 2013:178

he learns something more terrible indeed, as Jocasta feared: “O Oedipus, god help you! God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, it was this *anagnorisis* that undid him.

Tiresias saw this from the beginning:

Oedipus: “How needlessly your riddles darken everything.”

Teiresias: “But aren’t you best at answering riddles.”

Oedipus: “Yes. Taunt me where you will find me great.”

Teiresias: “It is this very luck that has destroyed you.”<sup>98</sup>

Why was Oedipus destroyed, according to Teiresias? He learned who he was. Teiresias hints that he learned that terrible knowledge twice: he learned what human being was, while facing the sphinx, and he learned again who he was, when he solved the riddle of his birth. Clearly, there are several levels of *anagnorisis* here: the shallow discoveries (that Oedipus is the son of Laius, Oedipus killed Laius at the crossroads, Oedipus had fathered children with his own mother Jocasta, etc.), and the deeper discoveries (about the brokenness, incompleteness, and mortality that is part of human nature, about human reliance on seemingly spiteful gods, etc.).

Oedipus’ coming to knowledge from ignorance, his *anagnorisis*, is what ruins him. His spirited nature, that demands to know, is his only fault. He seeks to know not only for his own sake, but for the sake of Thebes. It is his very nobility that leads him astray.

Oedipus: “You’d rob us of this your gift of prophecy? You talk as one who had no care for law nor love for Thebes who reared you.”

Teiresias: “Yes, but I see that even your own words miss the mark (*hamartanousi*); therefore I must fear for mine.

Oedipus: “For god’s sake if you know of anything, do not turn from us; all of us kneel to you, all of us here, your suppliants.”

Teiresias: “All of you here know nothing. I will not bring to the light of day my troubles, mine—rather than call them yours.”<sup>99</sup>

Oedipus’ thumetic character, devoted as he is to his task of governing Thebes well, leads him to desire more knowledge than is good.<sup>100</sup> His *hamartia* is that desire for wisdom, born from his

<sup>97</sup> Greene and Lattimore 2013:166

<sup>98</sup> Greene and Lattimore 2013:136

<sup>99</sup> Green and Lattimore 2013:130

thumetic character. And so we return to the question of *hamartia*: Oedipus' mistakes of judgment were not the faults that undid him. His noble and thumetic character, run afoul of his imperfect circumstances, was his ruin. It is important to remember that Oedipus fits Aristotle's criteria for the tragic hero: he is not a bad man, deserving the punishment he receives, rather he is like us, of an "intermediate" character; in fact, he is more noble than most. One can imagine most political leaders of lesser character heeding the warnings of Jocasta to take the ignoble and easy path and leave off inquiry. Oedipus' very nobility made the curse of Apollo follow him all along. Even more, his discoveries about the world ruined him.<sup>101</sup> Sophocles' drama is drawing us to reflect not on how minor character flaws ruin good men but how the idiosyncrasies of certain generally good moral characters can lead to tragedy in imperfect circumstances. It also demonstrates how men can retain their nobility even in the midst of great suffering. And thus, the *hamartia* that changes Oedipus' fortunes is not so much in Oedipus as in the relation between Oedipus' broken character and the brokenness of the world. A literal translation of *hamartia* implies this relational aspect: *hamartia* means "a missing of the mark," or a disjunction between two things. An arrow may miss the mark for any number of reasons beyond a flaw in its balance. Just so, the hero of a drama may find himself in error (*hamartia*) not by some fault in his own character or judgment, but in the myriad imperfections by which he is surrounded.

Let us take stock of the state of our argument thus far. A tragedy has a plot that represents an action as if it had determinate formal structures and a beginning, a middle, and an end (which of course, actions in the real world hardly ever do). It presents a story of a man of slightly better character than the average falling from good fortune to ill. The best of these

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<sup>100</sup> Defined briefly in chapter I (pg. 22 note 42). Analyzed at length in chapter III (pp. 48-50)

<sup>101</sup> It is his thumetic response to an insult (a drunken man calls him a "bastard" in Corinth) that leads him to inquire at Delphi in the first place, and finally lands him in Thebes. It takes a particularly spirited character to respond to a drunken insult with a dangerous journey to inquire of the gods into our real character.

tragedies bring about this fall by means of *anagnorisis* attended by *peripateia*; that is, the tragic hero (shorthand for a man of the character before listed) falls into misfortune by his discoveries, or at least his discoveries and his fall are attendant upon each other. The *peripateia* is driven by the tragic hero's *hamartia*, the disjunction between his own character and the rift in the nature of things that he discovers.

The preceding interpretation of the *Poetics* has revealed the internal components of a good tragedy.<sup>102</sup> But one question remains for this all too brief treatment of the *Poetics* to be complete, at least for the current moment: what effect does that tragedy have on its audience? Aristotle gives two answers catharsis, and the tragic pleasure. It is our task to determine how closely these two effects are related and which, if either, is the end of tragedy.

I will address the tragic pleasure first. Aristotle notes that tragedy must arouse pity and fear, and that this pity may come from several sources. Spectacle may arouse pity and fear, of course, but the best dramatist, Aristotle writes, relies on the structure and events of the plot to arouse these emotions.

τὸ δὲ διὰ τῆς ὄψεως τοῦτο παρασκευάζειν ἀτεχνότερον καὶ χορηγίας δεόμενον ἐστίν. οἱ δὲ μὴ τὸ [9] φοβερὸν διὰ τῆς ὄψεως ἀλλὰ τὸ τερατῶδες μόνον [10] παρασκευάζοντες οὐδὲν τραγωδία κοινωνοῦσιν: οὐ γὰρ πᾶσαν δεῖ ζητεῖν ἡδονὴν ἀπὸ τραγωδίας ἀλλὰ τὴν οἰκείαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως δεῖ ἡδονὴν παρασκευάζειν τὸν ποιητὴν, φανερόν ὡς τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐμποητέον. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1453b9-14)

Those, however, who make use of the spectacle to put before us that which is mere monstrous and not productive of fear, are wholly out of touch with tragedy; not every kind of pleasure should be required of a tragedy, but only its own proper pleasure. The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation; it is clear, therefore, that the causes should be included in the incidents of his story.

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<sup>102</sup> Not exhaustively. These, however, are the elements of the plot, which is the most important feature of tragedy, as Aristotle notes. These also, more than spectacle, thought, and diction, are key in producing the cathartic effect of tragedy, as shall be seen below (chapter IV).

The tragic pleasure is a pleasure of pity and fear. It is, in short, our ability to feel pity and fear in a pleasurable way. Aristotle notes that the pleasure is by the imitation, and that the causes of the events in the story contribute to that pleasure. A second source of the tragic pleasure, then, is the ability to behold pitiable and fearful events and understand why they happened and how they ended. The beauty of a tragedy, Aristotle writes, is that it is of such magnitude that it can be comprehended at a glance, and that it has a necessary or natural beginning, middle, and end. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1450b20-35) Seeing the formal structures of an event gives us a pleasure of comprehending the event. Although one could potentially see pleasure as the end of poetry, Aristotle nowhere makes this claim. Else argues that the tragic pleasure, not catharsis, is the end of tragedy. This point is addressed more fully in the following chapter by analysis of the *Politics*. However, a brief note on Else's reading of the *Poetics* is necessary here. He translates *eleou kai phobou* (ἔλεου καὶ φόβου) as "the pitiful and fearful event" of tragedy, and *toiauta ta pathemata* (τοιαύτα τὰ παθήματα) as "such like passionate events."<sup>103</sup> In the course of these events, the tragic hero is declared *katharos*. That, according to Else, is catharsis, and for him, it is primarily internal to the tragedy, rather than primarily an effect on the audience. Such a convoluted translation standing against the interpretive tradition and the clear and primary meaning of Aristotle's text is itself unjustified, even without the further testimony of the *Politics*.<sup>104</sup> Nowhere does Aristotle speak of the pleasure as the end or final cause of tragedy.

Our second alternative, catharsis, remains an ambiguous concept. Literally it means "purification," but how and for whom that purification occurs is a complex question. Aristotle speaks of a catharsis of pity, fear, and other such like emotions (*toiauta ta pathemata*). Without venturing into the complex questions of what catharsis is or how it might have worked (such

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<sup>103</sup> Else 1963:439

<sup>104</sup> My analysis of the *Politics* on tragedy will come in the following chapter.

questions are the subjects of chapters III and IV, respectively) we can at least claim one thing about catharsis with relative assurance: namely, that it is the end of tragedy. Aristotle quite clearly lists catharsis as the final cause in his definition of tragedy:

ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας [25] καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b24-28)

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

The events re-presented in tragedy are shown in such a way as to arouse pity and fear and to “catharse” “such emotions” through that pity and fear.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps the best way to approach the nature of catharsis, given its brief treatment in the *Poetics*, is obliquely. If catharsis is the end of tragedy, an examination of the end of tragedy as Aristotle discusses it elsewhere will at least test that claim, and likely lead us to the nature of catharsis.

### Chapter III: The Politics of Tragedy

That the cathartic end of tragedy occurred in the setting of a political community is a known historical fact. But that this catharsis was in itself politically oriented is another claim entirely. It is one, however, that is borne up by Aristotle's own statement on the subject. Thus, this chapter will approach catharsis from a political standpoint. First, I will examine Aristotle's remarks on the political nature of tragedy from the *Politics*. Turning from the *Politics* to the *Poetics*, I will examine more closely what the political function of tragedy was from this

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<sup>105</sup> I invent the verb “catharse.” At this point a representing the process of catharsis with any English verb would serve to conceal more than it would reveal.

standpoint, concluding that tragedy's political purpose is therapy of damaged *thumoi* among the citizens. Having done so, I will turn to the nature of *thumos* that tragedy addresses and analyze its place in Aristotle's view of action and responsibility. I will demonstrate that *thumos* fits perfectly into the nexus of *hamartia*, *peripateia*, and *anagnorisis* found in the *muthos* of a tragedy. I conclude that catharsis served the political purpose of thumetic therapy for Athenian citizen-soldiers.

Before I proceed with my analysis, however, it is perhaps best to address two preliminary points. First, throughout my paper, I have referred to the Greek notion of spiritedness, or *thumos*. In this chapter, that aspect of the soul will take prominence. For Aristotle, it comes in the part of the soul that is not in itself reasoning, but may serve reason. Carnes Lord describes this part of the soul as follows: "that part of the soul which is capable of obeying reason without itself being reasonable is elsewhere called by the Aristotle the 'desiring' (*epithumetikon*) or the passionate (*pathetikon*, *orektikon*) part of the soul."<sup>106</sup> As Aristotle's varying terms in the quotation above indicate, there is wide variety of emotions and faculties in this part of the soul. Aristotle distinguishes in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1149a25-b8) between a portion of this part of the soul that acts out of desire (this part we may infer is *epithumetikon*) and a part that acts out of passion or emotion (which we may infer is *pathetikon*). Here, *thumos* forms part of the passionate, emotional part of the soul. Though Plato divides the soul at large differently, with Lord, we can read their understandings of *thumos* together. In reference to the emotions proper to tragedy, Lord writes,

Aristotle could mean that class of passions which is associated with the experience of 'pain' rather than of pleasure or desire, passions which have their locus in what Plato had identified as the "spirited" (*thumetikon*) part of the soul... Though *thumos* frequently carries the simple meaning of 'anger,' it encompasses a range of passions

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<sup>106</sup> Lord 1982:39



bearing on men's social and political relationships—moral indignation, friendship, the desire for honor and superiority.<sup>107</sup>

We may follow Lord in distinguishing *thumos* from other functions of the non-rational part of the soul in two ways. First, *thumos* seems in general be the soul's reaction to pain. Out of this reaction to pain, it takes its second distinguishing character: its moral or political nature. While the part of the soul that we describe as epithumetic seems to have to do with the body's desire for other bodily things, *thumos* seems to be the soul's reaction to other souls, and its core seems to lie in our reactions to the pain that other souls cause us and our friends.<sup>108</sup>

*Thumos* itself, as noted above, is not a reasonable faculty of the soul. But it is understood by both Plato and Aristotle to be one that is more closely allied with reason. Plato famously places the two non-rational parts of his tripartite soul in the harnesses of the chariot guided by reason in the *Phaedrus*. There, *thumos* is represented as a brave and noble charger, while desire is a dilapidated and mangy old nag that must be constantly trained to acquiesce to reason by the already more noble thumetic steed (*Phaedrus* 253d and following). Aristotle claims in *Nichomachean Ethics* that actions performed out of *thumos* are more natural and in accord with reason than actions performed from motives of physical desire (*Nich. Eth.* 1149b8). The close connection of *thumos* to reason explains why both rhetoric and poetry, as we shall see below, although they are apprehended cognitively, affect *thumos* so strongly. In good poetry, as mentioned above, the plot is the most important and most moving aspect of the play. The mind apprehends the plot as the most intelligible portion of the drama. The close connection of *thumos* to reason explains why an intelligible thing (the plot) can affect *thumos*, the non-rational

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<sup>107</sup> Lord 1982:160

<sup>108</sup> As we may expect, a large body of secondary literature exists regarding *thumos*. On early Greek and Homeric thought on *thumos*, see *Psyche* (Rohde 1972:390). On Greek thought on *thumos* from Homer to Plato, see *Ruling Passion*, (Newell 2000:103-140), on *thumos* in Aristotle's political thought, see "Aristotle's Anthropology" (Lord 1991:59-73) and "Women, Soldiers, Citizens: On the Politics of Virility," (Salkever 1991:185-190).

part of the soul. If we may borrow Plato's analogy, upon hearing a tragedy, reason gives freer reign to its thumetic steed, and the soul is moved by the tragic emotions.

Second, one objection ought to be answered. It may be argued that a didactic view of tragedy is unworthy of its status as a great poetic art, that it reduces tragedy to petty moralizing rather than reflection on the tragic character of the world, or some other higher goal.<sup>109</sup> This objection, however, can only arise from a modern critic. As noted above, the distinction between fine arts and useful arts was simply not made in Aristotle's thought on the matter. A tentative distinction between arts such as medicine and agriculture on the one hand, and mimetic arts, on the other, indeed existed, but nowhere does Aristotle claim that one art is more useful than another. In fact, the *Poetics* quite clearly claims, as noted above, that tragedy has an end external to itself; namely, the catharsis of pity, fear, and other such emotions in its audience. He leaves us no room to view tragedy as an art for art's sake. That the Greeks at large shared his view we can gather from the simple fact that they referred to the great tragic poets as *didaskaloi*; that is, teachers.<sup>110</sup> Unlike we moderns, the Greeks fostered no separation between art and life; and thus, their life informed their art (through *mimesis*), and art informed, educated, and elevated the lives of men (through *catharsis*).<sup>111</sup>

That tragedy did indeed serve to educate the Athenians (in this very broad sense) Aristotle makes clear at several points in the *Politics*. Aristotle explicitly states that mimetic arts in general are educative in *Politics* VIII. Music, he says, helps in forming right judgments and in

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<sup>109</sup> For a presentation of and answer to this objection, see Lord 1982:151.

<sup>110</sup> This claim has been interpreted in several ways. Some have seen *didaskaloi* as teachers for a specific occasion, and hence saw relevance to contemporaneous political events in many of the tragedies. (For such a position, see the political lessons contained in the *Oresteia*, as seen Richard Kuhns (1962). However, this specific political connotation does not rule out a broader political connotation for the term, one that connects their educative function with the central function of the tragedies themselves, namely, catharsis.

<sup>111</sup> By speaking of catharsis in these terms I am not advocating for the particular interpretation of catharsis that claims that catharsis is an "education in virtue." Understood in the narrow sense used by this interpretation it would mean that catharsis is more a *paideia* for a developing soul than a *therapeia* for a damaged one. For an explication of the view, see Halliwell 1986. I will argue that this does not hold true to the text of the *Poetics*.

taking delight in good and noble actions; rhythm, he says, imitates anger, and melody, gentleness. (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1340a20) He notes, “enough has been said to show that music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young.” (Aristotle *Politics* 1340b8)<sup>112</sup> In the preceding book, Aristotle made clear that education was not simply for the young: all citizens must learn to obey in their youth and rule in their adulthood. (Aristotle *Politics* 133a5) In Book VIII, he discusses music education through the different modes that clearly serve to provide education especially to adult citizens.<sup>113</sup> While, in his account, catharsis by music and by poetry remain different in their nature and function, as I shall argue later, Aristotle connects them by virtue of their participation in the broader educational schema of the *Politics* (Aristotle *Politics* 1341b35).

From the preceding examination, several claims can be drawn. First, that Aristotle viewed mimetic arts such as music and poetry as educative to virtue, and second; that these arts continue to serve an educative function after a man is “educated,” i.e., his education is completed. The educative function of these arts rather than their pleasurable nature is their true end, as Aristotle states explicitly in Book VIII:

συμβέβηκε δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ποιεῖσθαι τὰς παιδιὰς τέλος: ἔχει γὰρ ἴσως ἡδονὴν τινα καὶ τὸ τέλος, ἀλλ’ οὐ τὴν τυχοῦσαν, ζητοῦντες δὲ ταύτην λαμβάνουσιν ὡς ταύτην ἐκείνην, διὰ τὸ τῷ τέλει τῶν πράξεων ἔχειν ὁμοίωμα τι. (Aristotle *Politics* 1339b32-35)

It sometimes happens that men make amusement the end, for the end probably contains some element of pleasure, though not any ordinary or lower pleasure; but they mistake the lower for the higher, and in seeking for the one find the other, since every pleasure has a likeness to the end of action.

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<sup>112</sup> ἐκ μὲν οὖν τούτων φανερόν ὅτι δύναται ποίον τι τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἥθος ἢ μουσικὴ παρασκευάζειν, εἰ δὲ τοῦτο δύναται ποιεῖν, δῆλον ὅτι προσακτέον καὶ παιδευτέον ἐν αὐτῇ τοὺς νέους. All Greek text of the *Politics* is from *Aristotle's Politica*, Ross 1957. All translations come from McKeon 1941.

<sup>113</sup> On music for aged citizens: Arist. *Pol.* 1342b15-30; on the purposes of different kinds of music (including musical catharsis): 1341b30; on music as continuing education for those who are “free and educated.” 1342a15-30.

The end, says Aristotle, is not the pleasure we draw from these arts, for these arts are simply rest, relaxation, and in some cases, encouragement on the journey toward the final end; namely, *eudaimonia*.<sup>114</sup> Aristotle says that music and leisurely arts provide an “alleviation of past toil” and “recreation” but also having “an influence on character and the soul.” (Aristotle *Politics* 1340a5) Aristotle paints a portrait of the arts as therapeutic: their function is to give rest, purification, and encouragement for the soul. In Aristotle’s ideal state, just as the legislators would prescribe physical training for health of the body, so they would prescribe musical and poetic training for the health of the soul. This education would be continuing and remedial.

My claims regarding the therapeutic function of art may hold true for the mimetic arts as a whole, but what of tragedy in particular? I contend that the positions we have inferred from the *Politics* can be applied; namely, that tragedy serves as an educational recreation that reforms the soul after traumatic events and prepares us to face future difficulties. This process is known as catharsis.<sup>115</sup> Education and recreation stand not as opposites in Aristotle’s *Politics* but rather in the relation of part and whole: education is a very broad political institution which includes all activities that shape the well-being of the body and soul, including recreative activities like the mimetic arts.<sup>116</sup> Such is Aristotle’s view of tragedy in the *Politics*. Furthermore, Aristotle indicates that the positions advocated in the *Politics* hold true for the *Poetics* as well. In the

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<sup>114</sup> *Eudaimonia* (good relation with the gods, happiness, human flourishing) is, of course, the subject of much ancient musing and long scholarly analysis. It remains important to my study, simply because of its importance in Aristotelian philosophy. Any mainstream interpretation in the tradition of interpretation would be consistent with my argument. In particular, see Ackrill 1980 or Nagel 1980. For a perspective particularly salient to my thesis, see Nussbaum 1986.

<sup>115</sup> I do not make any new claims here, I simply unite several of the existing positions on catharsis. For catharsis as a therapeutic cleansing, see *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (Buchner 1951:240 and following). For catharsis as part of Aristotle’s political education see *Aristotle’s Poetics*, (Halliwell 1986:196 and following.) My analysis so far has simply puts the two positions together.

<sup>116</sup> As an interesting but only dubiously relevant linguistic aside, note how the English “recreation” captures the meaning of *poiesis* and *mimesis*. Recreation involves creation (*poiesis*), but it is a *re*-creation, presumably in relation to something that came before, and thus it is also a *mimesis*.

*Politics*, he refers to a further treatment of poetic catharsis, indicating that the two treatments of poetry are consistent:

φαμὲν δ' οὐ μιᾶς ἔνεκεν ὠφελείας τῇ μουσικῇ χρῆσθαι δεῖν ἀλλὰ καὶ πλειόνων χάριν  
(καὶ γὰρ παιδείας ἔνεκεν καὶ καθάρσεως—τί δὲ λέγομεν τὴν κάθαρσιν, νῦν μὲν  
ἀπλῶς, πάλιν δ' ἐν τοῖς περὶ [40] ποιητικῆς ἐροῦμεν σαφέστερον... (Aristotle *Politics*  
1341b37-40)

But we maintain further that music should be studied, not for the sake of one, but of many benefits, that is to say, with view to education, purgation, (the word purgation we use at present without explanation, but when hereafter we speak of poetry, we will treat the subject with more precision)...

Thus, following Aristotle, we may turn from this examination of education in the *Politics* to the *Poetics* for our investigation of the political function of catharsis.<sup>117</sup>

Aristotle sadly does not treat catharsis much more extensively in the *Poetics*, but he does at least give us a more definite idea of the passions that catharsis affects. Aristotle notes that they are pity, fear, and other such passions. Our task, then, is to classify these passions according to their proper function in the soul, discovering in the process what the phrase “other such passions” means in the *Poetics*. In order to examine pity, fear, and “other such passions” we turn to the *Rhetoric*. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle lists anger, calmness, friendship, enmity, fear, confidence, shame, shamelessness, kindness, unkindness, pity, indignation, envy, and emulation as the emotions to be influenced by political rhetoric. Each of these emotions is thumetic in nature. Nowhere does Aristotle speak of inciting the passions of the body: lust, hunger, greed, and the like lie outside the scope of his rhetoric. Aristotle treats of these thumetic emotions while discussing the nature and purpose of political rhetoric, because he viewed these emotions as essentially political in nature and indeed necessary for the proper functioning of the *polis*. This

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<sup>117</sup>Else (1963:443) disagrees on this point, arguing that a connection cannot be made between the *Politics* and *Poetics*. It is indeed true that the *Poetics* hardly presents us with a more exact definition of catharsis (the following one relating to musical catharsis in the *Politics* is, if anything, more exact). Perhaps Aristotle references a lost part of the *Poetics*. However, Aristotle’s explicit claim remains: we may, he states, turn from one work to the other, allowing each to inform our understanding of the other. I shall thus proceed in this manner.

would make catharsis a cleansing of *thumos* as part of a specifically political education, as reinforcing my claim above in the discussion of the *Politics*.

At the beginning of this chapter we saw the place of *thumos* in the soul; reversing Plato's *ordo operandi*, let us now turn to its role in the city. A closer examination of the role of *thumos* in the city will reveal the context in which the *thumos* might become disordered and in need of catharsis. Understanding the context of this disorder will allow a firmer understanding of the nature of the catharsis that treats this disorder. Let us begin with an examination of the role of *thumos*. Aristotle recognizes the major role that *thumos* plays in the functioning of the *polis* in both political and military roles. When speaking of the proper character of the citizens of the ideal *polis*, Aristotle recommends the spirited (thumetic) emotions:

τὸ δὲ τῶν Ἑλλήνων γένος, ὥσπερ μεσεύει κατὰ [30] τοὺς τόπους, οὕτως ἀμφοῖν μετέχει. καὶ γὰρ ἔνθυμον καὶ διανοητικόν ἐστιν: διόπερ ἐλεύθερόν τε διατελεῖ καὶ βέλτιστα πολιτευόμενον καὶ δυνάμενον ἄρχειν πάντων, μιᾷς τυγχάνον πολιτείας. τὴν αὐτὴν δ' ἔχει διαφορὰν καὶ τὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἔθνη πρὸς ἄλληλα: τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἔχει τὴν φύσιν μονόκωλον, τὰ δὲ εὖ κέκραται πρὸς ἀμφοτέρας τὰς δυνάμεις ταύτας. φανερόν τοίνυν ὅτι δεῖ διανοητικούς τε εἶναι καὶ θυμοειδεῖς τὴν φύσιν τοὺς μέλλοντας εὐαγώγους ἔσεσθαι τῷ νομοθέτῃ πρὸς τὴν ἀρετὴν. ὅπερ γὰρ φασὶ τινες δεῖν ὑπάρχειν τοῖς φύλαξι, τὸ φιλητικὸν μὲν εἶναι τῶν γνωρίμων πρὸς δὲ τοὺς ἀγνώστους, ὁ θυμὸς ἐστὶν ὁ ποιοῦν τὸ φιλητικόν: αὕτη γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς δύναμις ἣ φιλοῦμεν. σημεῖον δέ: πρὸς γὰρ τοὺς συνήθεις καὶ φίλους ὁ θυμὸς αἵρεται μᾶλλον ἢ πρὸς τοὺς ἀγνώστους, ὀλιγωρεῖσθαι νομίσας. διὸ καὶ Ἀρχίλοχος προσηκόντως τοῖς φίλοις ἐγκαλῶν διαλέγεται πρὸς τὸν θυμόν: “σὺ γὰρ δὴ παρὰ φίλων ἀπάγχει.” καὶ τὸ ἄρχον δὲ καὶ τὸ ἐλεύθερον ἀπὸ τῆς δυνάμεως ταύτης ὑπάρχει πᾶσιν: ἀρχικὸν γὰρ καὶ ἀήττητον ὁ θυμὸς. οὐ καλῶς δ' ἔχει λέγειν χαλεποὺς εἶναι πρὸς τοὺς ἀγνώστους: πρὸς οὐθέννα γὰρ εἶναι χρή τοιοῦτον, οὐδέ εἰσιν οἱ μεγάλόψυχοι τὴν φύσιν ἄγριοι, πλὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἀδικοῦντας. (Aristotle, *Politics* 1327b30-28a10)

The Hellenic race, which is situated between them (Europeans and Asians) is likewise intermediate in character, being high-spirited and intelligent. And clearly those whom the legislator will most easily lead to virtue may be expected to be both intelligent and courageous. Some say that the guardians should be friendly towards those whom they know, fierce towards those whom they do not know. Now, passion is the quality of the soul which begets friendship and enables us to love; notably the spirit within us is more stirred against our friends and acquaintances than against those who are unknown to us, when we think that we are despised by them; for which reason Archilochus, complaining of his friends, very naturally addresses his

soul in these words ‘For surely thou are plagued on account of friends.’ The power of command and the love of freedom in all men are based upon this quality, for passion is commanding and invincible. Nor is it right to say that the guardians should be fierce towards those whom they do not know, for we ought not to be out of temper with any one; and a lofty spirit is not fierce by nature, but only when excited against evil-doers.

Here Aristotle notes that the best citizens are spirited. Aristotle speaks of courage (and thus its opposite, fear) he speaks of friendship and fierceness (perhaps the effect of indignation and anger), and the ability to love (perhaps including kindness and pity). Aristotle’s point is clear: the good citizen is a spirited one. In Athens, the citizen was also a soldier, so by implication at least, *thumos* is also a military virtue. As in Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle naturally associates the spirited character with the defense of the city. Though the paragraph quoted above does not specifically mention the military, it is strong with implication: the fierceness of the spirited toward strangers, the quotation from Archilochus (the servant of Ares and of the Muses), and the speech regarding strife all invite us to consider *thumos* in a military context. The whole passages comes in a more overtly military context: Aristotle speaks of Greece as the proper mean between men of pure spiritedness (the barbarians of the north) and men of pure intelligence but without spirit (the Asians of the south). He writes:

τὸ δὲ τῶν Ἑλλήνων γένος, ὥσπερ μεσεύει κατὰ [30] τοὺς τόπους, οὕτως ἀμφοῖν μετέχει. καὶ γὰρ ἐνθυμον καὶ διανοητικόν ἐστίν· διόπερ ἐλεύθερόν τε διατελεῖ καὶ βέλτιστα πολιτευόμενον καὶ δυνάμενον ἄρχειν πάντων, μιᾷς τυγχάνον πολιτείας. (Aristotle *Politics* 1327b29-32)

But the Hellenic race, which is situated between them, is likewise intermediate in character, being high-spirited and also intelligent. Hence it continues free, and is the best governed of any nation, and, if it could be formed into one state, would be able to rule the world.

The spirited virtues are the virtues of the citizen and the virtues of the soldier.

But spiritedness is not merely positive; it contains its own dangers. These dangers make it susceptible to disorder and potentially in need of some catharsis. Aristotle directly refers to

Plato's account of spiritedness in the *Republic* above when he writes that "some say that the guardians should be friendly towards those whom they know, fierce towards those whom they do not know." In the *Republic*, Plato is less optimistic about the positive potency of the spirited soul, and seems to think that this is about all we can hope for from *thumos*: intense friendship toward the familiar, and intense dislike toward the unfamiliar.<sup>118</sup> Aristotle too is not without qualms regarding the spirited element of the soul: "Spiritedness is a passion that is bestial in its disposition, unrelenting in its hold, harsh and violent in its power, a cause of murders, ally of misfortune, companion of injury, instigator of dishonor and waste of substance, and finally, of destruction."<sup>119</sup> We may say that the spirited character is a double-edged sword; it may bite both ways. Immoderation of *thumos* is dangerous to the city; thus the need for catharsis.

Greek literature since the *Iliad* has emphasized war as a primary cause of immoderation with respect to *thumos*. The Muses have sung not once but again and again of soldiers' wrath leading them to commit villainy. When Aristotle and Plato speak of the guardians needing to be friendly to citizens while at the same time fierce to enemies, it is easy to imagine that they had seen warriors unable to act as friendly toward friends as they once had, after living for years in a state of fierceness toward enemies.<sup>120</sup> Lawrence Tritle argues that Xenophon's portrait of Clearchus paints just such a picture. Clearchus, like Socrates, was a survivor of the Peloponnesian War, but instead of turning to the consolations of philosophy, he could only be cheerful and friendly to comrades in battle. Tritle writes, "Clearchus dedicated his whole life to the pursuit of war, preparing for it in every way possible, even relishing the experience of battle.

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<sup>118</sup> Lord 1982:162

<sup>119</sup> Lord 1982:163. A fragment from a lost Aristotelian text "On the Passion of Anger." Tr. Cares Lord.

<sup>120</sup> Monoson 2014:138. Sara Monoson persuasively argues that Socrates' war experiences (including, she argues, suffering PTSD) are central to Plato's portrayal of Socrates and to Plato's political philosophy. She correctly notes the martial prowess of Socrates as portrayed in the *Symposium* and the *Laches*, using historical sources to note that Socrates would have suffered experiences making it eminently likely that he struggled with (and overcame) combat trauma.



Xenophon says that in going into battle his ‘forbidding look seemed positively cheerful.’”<sup>121</sup>

Tritle also notes that ancient authors also speak of the other extreme. Gorgias, in his *Encomium on Helen* speaks of soldiers so deprived of spirit by war that they cannot bear even to see its instruments:

When warriors put on their armor and weapons, some for defense and others for offense, the mere sight of these terrifies the souls of some, who flee panic-stricken even from anticipated dangers as if these were really present...And later some of these men lose presence of mind, and others become unable to work, suffering from terrible diseases or incurable madness.<sup>122</sup>

In each case, war has deprived these soldiers of the proper balance of spiritedness; Clearchus seems to lack pity and the more friendly elements of the *thumos*, the soldiers Gorgias speaks of seem to have too much fear, and have lost the confident aspects of their *thumoi*.<sup>123</sup> Parallels between these distant ancient accounts and accounts by veterans of the last few decades are striking. Some modern veterans describe an intense fear of the trappings of war, some seem unable to live without them. Shay describes veterans who find it difficult to live without a weapon at hand, who would wander dangerous parts of the city in search of an experience similar to combat, and who remained constantly hypervigilant.<sup>124</sup> Veterans can also experience an opposite desire to be entirely free of anything that might remind them of combat. I personally know a decorated captain, courageous in combat, who instinctively dropped to the ground pulling his wife with him whenever he heard a sudden loud noise. He did this for months after his return from a particularly difficult deployment to Afghanistan, and only could stop after long and painful treatment that reversed the habituations he developed while overseas. He suffered

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<sup>121</sup> Tritle 2014:92

<sup>122</sup> Tritle 2014:92

<sup>123</sup> Whether these soldiers would meet a clinical diagnosis for PTSD, is I think, irrelevant. They have experienced some traumatic event or events in combat that have pulled their *thumos* out of balance – they have suffered combat trauma.

<sup>124</sup> Shay 1994:xiv

from disorderly anger. He was unable to enjoy himself in public environments because he could not relax when he was unable to cover his back. The worst cases seem to combine excess fear of the trappings of war with the desire for the adrenaline rush of combat and the lack of the ability to feel with others (compassion) and hence the inability to pity.<sup>125</sup>

Soldiers develop these disorders of the *thumos* as survival mechanisms. The very strength of *thumos* that can lead a soldier to commit dastardly deeds is also the surest guarantor of survival in a combat situation. The ability to react quickly and fiercely to an attack is an indispensable function of fighting spirit. In more difficult situations, when deliberation is possible but decisiveness is essential, it is still *thumos* that makes a soldier able to carry out the sometimes very difficult dictates of his reason. Sometimes the cost of saving one's own life or the lives of one's comrades comes at a bitter cost, not only for the enemy or civilians but also for one's future psychological health. Shay writes how

One Marine veteran in our program is hounded by the memory of a close friend who was wounded, unable to move, and screaming in agony for someone to please kill him. The North Vietnamese were using him as bait for their ambush and killed one after another would-be rescuer. Our patient, seeing no alternative, shot his friend to prevent more deaths. Another man is tormented by the memory of entering a village from the south while other, inexperienced soldiers were entering it from the east. A Vietnamese baby was sitting in the crossroads at the center of the village. Our patient could see remote trigger wires running to the spot under the baby and began to shout and wave his arms at the other soldiers not to go near the baby. The other soldiers could not hear and simply waved back. Seeing no alternative, our patient fired a burst from his M-60 into the baby, setting off a large explosion.<sup>126</sup>

In each case, the veteran could have simply waited indecisively, fearing any action, as all actions would end badly.<sup>127</sup> Though in each case we justly shrink from calling their decision the right one, we can hardly call it the wrong one. These soldiers had run upon situations in which

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<sup>125</sup> Shay 1994:xiv

<sup>126</sup> Shay 1994:214

<sup>127</sup> Such a passive reaction may seem unreasonable; and justly, for it indeed is unreasonable. But when our spirit does not have the strength to ratify the demands of reason, we act contrary to reason. Such was the advice of Jocasta to Oedipus: "live lightly as one can, unthinkingly." Green and Lattimore 2013:160.

there was no right choice, and their strong *thumoi*, profitable servants of their reason, when a right and wrong choice were available, became their psychological downfall when faced with equally terrible horns of a dilemma.<sup>128</sup> Once the *thumos* leads us to commit such a dreadful action, it often becomes wild and broken, leading to disordered emotions over which the reason has lost control. Well might the soul cease to operate by reason, when reason had dictated so monstrous a deed.

In sum, the thumetic emotions are salutary and indeed necessary for the *polis* and indeed essential for survival in combat, but if the *thumos* is injured, thumetic passions can begin to harm rather than assist the *polis*. The right measure of calmness and anger makes a man angry at injustice to the right amount, the right measure of fear and confidence makes a man a courageous soldier,<sup>129</sup> the right measure of pity allows him to feel pity when he ought and steel himself to the suffering of another when he ought, the right measure of shame and shamelessness preserves a man's honor without paralyzing him by fear of shame, etc. Keeping these passions at the mean is the stuff of the virtue of a citizen and a soldier. This is indeed Aristotle's definition of courage: a mean between fear and confidence. (Aristotle *Nich. Eth.* 1115a8) When combat trauma has undone the order of the soul, barring some therapy, it is unable to maintain the mean of virtue.

Given that catharsis attempts to cleanse *thumos* of immoderation through arousing thumetic emotions, it would stand to reason that tragedy is essentially thumetic in character. I have already noted the prevalence of *thumos* in *Oedipus Tyrannos*.<sup>130</sup> I argue that we see the

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<sup>128</sup> I take these anecdotes as textbook examples of *hamartiai*: through no great fault in their own character, men at the wrong place at the wrong time were forced to perform monstrous actions in pursuit of noble ends. Aristotle does likewise: he notes in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1 and III.2 that 'involuntary action' (which contains a broad spectrum of actions for Aristotle, from action due to intense emotion to action due to ignorance) is worthy of neither praise nor blame but rather regret and pity.

<sup>129</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a7-b8. In fact Aristotle understands courage in an exclusively military light: the right amount of fear and confidence allows a man to hold his place in the phalanx, neither rushing forward nor falling behind. An over or under-eager soldier could compromise the entire formation.

<sup>130</sup> In the section on *anagnorisis* above (pp. 40-43)

same *thumos* at work in nearly every single Greek drama. Medea is outstandingly thumetic, Antigone is a more noble, but as strongly spirited, soul, Eteocles brings on his ruin through his confidence, in the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, Electra, and Orestes are all particularly spirited individuals, Ajax, of course, is the very soul of *thumos*, Philoktetes' rage is proverbial, Prometheus' overconfidence and raging furor is extremely thumetic in character. Of the surviving tragedies, only one tragedy is driven by passions other than thumetic ones.

Euripides' *Hippolytus* features Phaedra driven mad by lust. Her lust is aroused, however, by an angered Aphrodite. The slight of Hippolytus<sup>131</sup> has angered Aphrodite, and she, because of her anger, causes the deaths of Phaedra and Hippolytus. In tragedy, even the goddess of erotic love takes on a thumetic character. Carnes Lord sums up the situation as follows: "The passions associated with spiritedness—fear, pity, indignation, anger, jealousy, love of honor—are the common fare of tragic poetry and the very idea of the tragic would seem intimately connected with the ambivalent nature of these passions."<sup>132</sup> In short, tragedy is the story of the operation of *thumos*.

Though a careful and complete examination of any of the tragedies listed above is outside the scope of this paper, even a cursory glance indicates that *thumos* leads to the undoing of their tragic heroes. If we may return to Oedipus, his spirited defense of the city against the plague causes his undoing. Teiresias says as much: Oedipus' demand to know the source of pollution in the city is the request in which he errs (*hamartanei*).<sup>133</sup> It is Oedipus' unrelenting will to knowledge that causes him harm. A man of weaker spirit might have simply obeyed the warnings of Teiresias and left the Thebans to suffer; but Oedipus, strong-willed as he was, demanded to know the knowledge that would be his undoing. It seems we may draw the

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<sup>131</sup> Slight, in the *Rhetoric* (1378b10) is a tactic used to arouse anger, the thumetic emotion *par excellence*.

<sup>132</sup> Lord 1982:164

<sup>133</sup> Green and Lattimore 2013:160

conclusion that tragic *hamartiai* can be accurately described as the situation in which a thumetic character comes up against a dilemma in which there is no right choice.<sup>134</sup> The tragedy could sometimes have been avoided if the tragic hero were a weaker man; hence Jocasta advises Oedipus, “why should man fear since chance is all in all for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing? Best to live lightly as one can, unthinkingly.”<sup>135</sup> Oedipus’ *thumos*, though, prevents him from passively living out the easy life that Jocasta urges on him: he must act and choose, and in his case, any active choice was a tragic one.

If *thumos* is indeed the real source of tragic *hamartiai*, it deserves a more careful examination. In particular, it is necessary to distance this claim from the argument mentioned in our previous chapter that the *hamartia* is in essence a moral flaw or an imperfection in character. Two key points distance the thumetic interpretation of *hamartia* from the “moral flaw” notion of *hamartia*. First, the spirited emotions are ambivalent. They make a character strong towards good or evil. A man of very strong spirit may remain virtuous as long as he preserves a mean in the particular elements of his spirit. Aristotle does not speak of preserving a mean of spiritedness as one can regulate the other passions; rather, he accepts spiritedness as a given fact of life.<sup>136</sup>

Carnes Lord writes,

For Aristotle as for Plato, however, the phenomenon of spiritedness appears to be of fundamental importance for understanding of human sociality, and thereby the limits or the nature of political life in particular; and for both the phenomenon of spiritedness is profoundly problematic. Spiritedness is indispensable for the best city just as it is an inescapable fact of political life as such; but it represents at the same

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<sup>134</sup> Lord, although he differs from my account of *hamartia* somewhat, concurs regarding its connection with *hamartia*. “An interpretation of tragic *hamartia* in light of Aristotle’s notion of moral weakness with respect to anger and the spirited passions generally makes excellent sense as an explanation of the apparent disproportion between the moral imperfection of the tragic hero and the seriousness of tragic error.” Lord 1982:181

<sup>135</sup> Green and Lattimore 2013 160

<sup>136</sup> Aristotle (*Politics* 1327b30-28a10) does speak of balancing spirit with intellect; but he does not here seek for a weakening of the spirit. When he says that the Greeks have more spirit than the Asians, for example, he does not therefore mean that their intellects are weaker. In the passage quoted above he indicates not that the Greeks have middling spirits, but that they have the best of both the spirit and intellect.

time a grave danger, as it constantly threatens the predominance in politics of prudence or reason.<sup>137</sup>

A strong spirit is not itself, therefore, a flaw in character like an immoderate physical passion is.

It is, in the true sense of the word, ambivalent: strong in either direction. When a man of spirit is also a man of wisdom, he is both a great and a good man. But when a man of spirit errs, no matter how small that error may be, or even whether the error is his own ‘fault,’ as we might say, his error is tragic. Secondly, a strong spirit, rather than heightening the guilt of a man’s error, actually tends to exonerate him from responsibility. Aristotle writes of the degrees of responsibility one may have for a harmful action:

τριῶν δὴ οὐσῶν βλαβῶν τῶν ἐν ταῖς κοινωνίαις, τὰ μὲν μετ’ ἀγνοίας ἀμαρτήματά ἐστιν, ὅταν μήτε ὄν μήτε ὁ μήτε ᾧ μήτε οὐ ἔνεκα ὑπέλαβε πράξει: ἡ γὰρ οὐ βάλλειν ἢ οὐ τούτῳ ἢ οὐ τοῦτον ἢ οὐ τούτου ἔνεκα ᾤθη, ἀλλὰ συνέβη οὐχ οὐ ἔνεκα ᾤθη, οἷον οὐχ ἵνα τρώσῃ ἀλλ’ ἵνα κεντήσῃ, ἢ οὐχ ὄν, ἢ οὐχ ᾧ. ὅταν μὲν οὖν παραλόγως ἢ βλάβῃ γένηται, ἀτύχημα: ὅταν δὲ μὴ παραλόγως, ἄνευ δὲ κακίας, ἀμάρτημα (ἀμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἢ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ἢ τῆς αἰτίας, ἀτυχεῖ δ’ ὅταν ἐξωθεν) : ὅταν δὲ εἰδῶς μὲν μὴ προβουλεύσας δέ, ἀδίκημα, οἷον ὅσα τε διὰ θυμὸν καὶ ἄλλα πάθη, ὅσα ἀναγκαῖα ἢ φυσικὰ συμβαίνει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις: ταῦτα γὰρ βλάπτοντες καὶ ἀμαρτάνοντες ἀδικοῦσι μὲν, καὶ ἀδικήματά ἐστιν, οὐ μέντοι πῶς ἀδικοὶ διὰ ταῦτα οὐδὲ πονηροί: οὐ γὰρ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἢ βλάβῃ: ὅταν δ’ ἐκ προαιρέσεως, ἀδικὸς καὶ μοχθηρός. διὸ καλῶς τὰ ἐκ θυμοῦ οὐκ ἐκ προνοίας κρίνεται: οὐ γὰρ ἄρχει ὁ θυμὸς ποιῶν, ἀλλ’ ὁ ὀργίσας. ἔτι δὲ οὐδὲ περὶ τοῦ γενέσθαι ἢ μὴ ἀμφισβητεῖται, ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ δικαίου: ἐπὶ φαινομένη γὰρ ἀδικία ἢ ὀργὴ ἐστίν.<sup>138</sup> (Aristotle *Nich. Eth.* 1135b11-35)

When it is not contrary to reasonable expectation, but does not imply vice, it is a mistake (for a man makes a mistake when the fault originates in him, but is the victim of accident when the origin lies outside him). When he acts with knowledge but not after deliberation, it is an act of injustice—e.g. the acts due to anger or to other passions necessary or natural to man; (thumetic passions) for when men do such harmful and mistaken acts they act unjustly, and the acts are acts of injustice, but this does not imply that the doers are unjust or wicked; for the injury is not due to vice. But when a man acts from choice, he is an unjust man and a vicious man. Hence acts proceeding from anger are rightly judged not to be done of malice aforethought; for it is not the man who acts in anger but he who enraged him that starts the mischief.

<sup>137</sup> Lord 1982:164

<sup>138</sup> All text from *Nich. Eth.* comes from *Ethica Nichomachica* (Bywater 1894). All English translations are taken from McKeon 1941.

Here Aristotle notes that a mistake (*hamartema*) may be the cause of an unjust act (*adikema*) while the man who commits the mistake is not viewed as an unjust (*adikaïos*) man, but rather may have committed the action through anger (*thumos*), meaning that although the action is unjust (*adikaïos*) the man himself remains just. Aristotle further remarks regarding the shamefulfulness of wrongdoing due to *thumos*:

ὅτι μὲν οὖν ἀκρασία καὶ ἐγκράτειά ἐστι μόνον περὶ ἅπερ ἀκολασία καὶ σωφροσύνη, καὶ ὅτι περὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἐστὶν ἄλλο εἶδος ἀκρασίας, λεγόμενον κατὰ μεταφορὰν καὶ οὐχ ἀπλῶς, δῆλον. ὅτι δὲ καὶ ἦττον αἰσχροῦ ἀκρασία ἢ τοῦ θυμοῦ ἢ ἡ τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν, θεωρήσωμεν. ἔοικε γὰρ ὁ θυμὸς ἀκούειν μὲν τι τοῦ λόγου, παρακούειν δέ, καθάπερ οἱ ταχεῖς τῶν διακόνων, οἱ πρὶν ἀκοῦσαι πᾶν τὸ λεγόμενον ἐκθέουσιν, εἴτα ἀμαρτάνουσι τῆς προστάξεως, καὶ οἱ κύνες, πρὶν σκέψασθαι εἰ φίλος, ἂν μόνον ψοφήσῃ, ὑλακτοῦσιν: οὕτως ὁ θυμὸς διὰ θερμότητα καὶ ταχυτήτα τῆς φύσεως ἀκούσας μὲν, οὐκ ἐπίταγμα δ' ἀκούσας, ὁρμᾷ πρὸς τὴν τιμωρίαν. ὁ μὲν γὰρ λόγος ἢ ἡ φαντασία ὅτι ὕβρις ἢ ὀλιγωρία ἐδήλωσεν, ὁ δ' ὥσπερ συλλογισάμενος ὅτι δεῖ τῷ τοιούτῳ πολεμεῖν χαλεπαίνει δὴ εὐθύς: ἢ δ' ἐπιθυμία, ἐὰν μόνον εἴπῃ ὅτι ἡδὺ ὁ λόγος ἢ ἡ αἴσθησις, ὁρμᾷ πρὸς τὴν ἀπόλαυσιν. ὥσθ' ὁ μὲν θυμὸς ἀκολουθεῖ τῷ λόγῳ πῶς, ἢ δ' ἐπιθυμία οὐ. αἰσχίων οὖν: ὁ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ θυμοῦ ἀκρατὴς τοῦ λόγου πῶς ἡττᾶται, ὁ δὲ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ οὐ τοῦ λόγου. ἔτι ταῖς φυσικαῖς μᾶλλον συγγνώμη ἀκολουθεῖν ὀρέξουσιν, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐπιθυμίαις ταῖς τοιαύταις μᾶλλον ὅσαι κοιναὶ πᾶσι, καὶ ἐφ' ὅσον κοιναί: ὁ δὲ θυμὸς φυσικώτερον καὶ ἡ χαλεπότης τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν τῶν τῆς ὑπερβολῆς καὶ τῶν μὴ ἀναγκαίων. (Aristotle, *Nich. Eth.* 1149a25-b8)

That incontinence in respect of anger is less disgraceful than that in respect of the appetites is what we will now proceed to see. Anger seems to listen to argument to some extent, but to mishear it, as do hasty servants who run out before they have heard the whole of what one says, and then muddle the order, or as dogs bark if there is but a knock at the door, before looking to see if it is a friend; so anger by reason of the warmth and hastiness of its nature, though it hears, does not hear an order, and springs to take revenge. For argument or imagination informs us that we have been insulted or slighted, and anger, reasoning as it were that anything like this must be fought against, boils up straightway...Therefore anger obeys the argument in a sense...Further we pardon people more easily for following natural desires, since we pardon them more easily for following such appetites as are common to all men, and in so far as they are common; now anger and bad temper are more natural than the appetites for excess.

Aristotle claims that he who acts out of passion (*thumos*) is less guilty than he who acts out of appetite. Thumetic passions are more natural and understandable, and more in alliance with reason, than the appetites. In the paragraph quoted above, Aristotle perhaps borrows Plato's

analogy of the spirited soul to a good guard-dog (Aristotle, *NE* 1149a25-b8, Plato, *Republic* 375e-376c). Sometimes, not through a moral fault of its own, but through its own particular excellence (that of guardianship), a guard dog will react improperly to a situation, e.g., barking at an unannounced friend rather than a foe. This analysis fits perfectly with the understanding of *hamartia* noted above: the particular excellence of the tragic hero dooms him to misfortune, not through his fault, but through the disjunction between that excellence and his circumstances. The small amount of moral responsibility that we find in an action committed out of anger is mirrored in Aristotle's description of the tragic hero and his fall: he is a good and noble man, perhaps just slightly above our own nobility, with, however, some slight irregularities of character. The *hamartia* is the minor irregularity in the character of the hero meeting the major imperfections and contradictions in the hero's surroundings. The result is a tragic punishment that far outweighs the faults that it punishes.

Let us take stock of the conclusions we have reached thus far. First, Aristotle and the Athenians viewed tragedy as an educative and therapeutic tool that could help the soul recover from past travails and prepare it to act virtuously in the future. Second, the emotions of tragedy (*toiauta ta pathemata*) are the thumetic emotions, and tragedy takes place in society where *thumos* is held in high regard, particularly among the gentleman-soldier class, but indeed among all citizens, as all citizens were soldiers. Third, we might also note that the thumetic emotions are the political emotions, and that they are mentioned in Aristotle in the context of political education and political rhetoric. Fourth, using Greek terms, we might define combat trauma as radical upsetting of the balance among thumetic emotions. Fifth, thumetic emotions were the driving force in tragedy, and whatever part of the *hamartia* lies in the tragic hero often does so as excess of *thumos*. From these several statements, we may conclude that tragedy was part of a



system of political education designed to restore the damaged *thumoi* of Athens' citizen-soldiers by a certain catharsis, through pity and fear, of such emotions. (Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b27) "Such emotions," given the grouping in the *Rhetoric*, are thumetic emotions. We may therefore venture a claim on the nature of catharsis: tragic catharsis is the purgation, through pity and fear, of thumetic emotions as part of political education in order to return the soul to the mean.<sup>139</sup> Put in terms of Plato's analogy of the soul, catharsis restores the proper relationship of horse and rider between *thumos* and reason by regulating the excesses of *thumos*. Notably, this situates catharsis as having the greatest effect toward those who have strong *thumoi* and whose *thumoi* may be in some sense disordered or traumatized. Both of those points make catharsis particularly salient for the combat veteran or anyone who knew a combat veteran.<sup>140</sup> Having thus defined the nature of catharsis, the task of our final chapter is to establish the means through which catharsis cleanses *thumos*.

#### Chapter IV: A Closer Look at Catharsis

In the last chapter I established the nature of catharsis, arguing that it was the purgation, through pity and fear, of thumetic emotions as part of political education in order to return the soul to the mean. Several theories have dominated the discussion about catharsis for the past several centuries. Each of these theories makes a claim regarding both the nature of catharsis and the means by which catharsis worked. I have already established my own argument for the

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<sup>139</sup> Aristotle notes each thumetic emotion as part of a pair in the *Rhetoric*: thus fear and confidence, anger and calmness, etc. It is possible to be too calm just as it is possible to be too angry.

<sup>140</sup> Given my analysis of the tragic audience at the beginning of my paper, my statements here would apply to nearly every single member of the audience: every Athenian would either have served or would know someone who had. Given the percentages of casualties I cite in my first chapter, likely every single audience member would have a close friend or family member killed in each of Athens' major campaigns.

nature of catharsis. I shall therefore proceed by testing the traditional theories against this new definition of catharsis as purgation of *thumos* and against what we know more specifically about the reason that such purgation is needed; namely, combat trauma. The dominant three theories of catharsis have been 1) a purgation of pity and fear, often taken to be a total purgation and release of those emotions through homeopathic exposure, 2) a purification of pity and fear, through turning these painful emotions into a tragic pleasure or an elevation of sentiment through high style, 3) an education that moderates the passions and orders the soul. Having examined and identified the strengths and weaknesses of each theory in turn, I shall propose my own theory of how catharsis must have functioned, one based on the work of combat trauma therapists together with my previous argument regarding combat trauma and *thumos*.

Proposed most forcefully by Jacob Bernays in his essay entitled *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie*, published in 1857, the first theory has perhaps been the most popular since that time.<sup>141</sup> The view argues that tragic catharsis is a medical metaphor for the purgation of impurities. According to this theory:

The thought, as he [Bernays] interpreted it, may be expressed thus. Tragedy excites the emotions of pity and fear—kindred emotions that are in the breasts of all men—and by the act of excitation affords a pleasurable relief. The feelings called forth by the tragic spectacle are not indeed permanently removed, but are quieted for the time, so that the system can fall back upon its normal course. The stage, in fact, provides a harmless and pleasurable outlet for instincts which demand satisfaction, and which can be indulged here more fearlessly than in real life.<sup>142</sup>

Bernays' theory, as is evident from the above paragraph, argues that catharsis purges pity and fear through the experience of pity and fear. S.H. Buchner, concurring with Bernay's theory, writes, "pity and fear, artificially stirred, expel the latent pity and fear which we bring with us from real life, or at least, such elements in them as are disquieting. In the pleasurable calm

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<sup>141</sup> Buchner 1951:244

<sup>142</sup> Buchner 1951:245

which follows when the passion is spent, an emotional cure has been wrought.”<sup>143</sup> Scholars who espouse this view tend to draw their support from medical or religious analogies or from

Aristotle’s treatment of the catharsis of enthusiasm in the *Politics*.<sup>144</sup> There, Aristotle writes:

οἷον ἔλεος καὶ φόβος, ἔτι δ’ ἐνθουσιασμός· καὶ γὰρ ὑπὸ ταύτης τῆς κινήσεως κατοκώχμοί τινές εἰσιν, ἐκ τῶν δ’ ἱερῶν μελῶν ὁρῶμεν τούτους, ὅταν χρήσωνται τοῖς ἐξοργιάζουσι τὴν ψυχὴν μέλεσι, καθισταμένους ὥσπερ ἰατρείας τυχόντας καὶ καθάρσεως· ταῦτό δὴ τοῦτο ἀναγκαῖον πάσχειν καὶ τοὺς ἐλεήμονας καὶ τοὺς φοβητικούς καὶ τοὺς ὅλως παθητικούς, τοὺς ἄλλους καθ’ ὅσον ἐπιβάλλει τῶν τοιούτων ἐκάστω, καὶ πᾶσι γίγνεσθαι τινα κάθαρσιν καὶ κουφίζεσθαι μεθ’ ἡδονῆς. (Aristotle *Politics* 1342a5-15)

For feelings such as pity and fear, or again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, whom we see as a result of the sacred melodies—when they have used the melodies that excite the soul to mystic frenzy—restored as though they had found healing and purgation (catharsis). Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted.

Proponents of the purely purgative view of catharsis cite this paragraph as evidence that the musical catharsis of enthusiasm of which Aristotle speaks is the same as the poetic catharsis of pity and fear. A careful analysis of the passage, however, reveals just the opposite. First, as quoted before, Aristotle is here speaking of catharsis simply or generally, and will speak of poetic catharsis more specifically at a later time. (Aristotle *Politics* 1341b38-40) Carnes Lord writes of this section of the *Politics*, “his account of catharsis will be a general account which dispense with the ‘distinctions’ that would be required in an accurate or clear account of particulars.”<sup>145</sup> Therefore, even at first glance, taking this general interpretation of catharsis to explain the more specific poetic one (which sadly is not explained further as Aristotle promises)

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<sup>143</sup> Buchner 1951:246

<sup>144</sup> See Buchner 1951:246

<sup>145</sup> Lord 1982:126

would be a risky endeavor. Furthermore, specific textual evidence leads us away from such an endeavor. Lord further explains the passage:

According to Aristotle, the catharsis of pity and fear is effective not only in the case of the pitying or the fearful or the “passionate” generally but also in the case of “others insofar as each is infected by such things”: the “certain catharsis” (*katharsis tis*) of which Aristotle speaks here is a catharsis which affects “all” (1342a14). As for enthusiasm, Aristotle says only that it is a “passion” (*pathos*) which affects “every soul” in some degree, and that “certain people” (*tines*) who come to be “possessed” (*katokochimoi*) by it are to obtain a healing and catharsis by listening to a certain kind of enthusiastic music, the “sacred tunes.”<sup>146</sup>

In short, while tragic catharsis has a universally salutary effect, catharsis of enthusiasm by music seems to effect different people in radically different ways. Regarding these cathartic melodies,

Lord notes:

Generally speaking, the tunes of Olympus affect men precisely by *making* them “enthusiastic.” Unlike the catharsis of pity and fear, the catharsis of enthusiasm does not affect all; it is not a necessary consequence of the experience of enthusiastic music. It would rather seem that enthusiastic music (or enthusiastic music of a certain kind) effects a catharsis of enthusiasm only in the case of those who were “possessed” by the passion of enthusiasm prior to and independently of any experience of enthusiastic music.<sup>147</sup>

The purgation of enthusiasm is radical and complete. As Lord remarks,<sup>148</sup> there is no half-way purging or purification of enthusiasm. Enthusiastic possession, was likely, as he points out, a kind of pathological condition diagnosed by the Greeks, and as such, they sought complete purgation of its impurity.<sup>149</sup> The catharsis of pity and fear, then, is radically different. Its efficacy is more or less universal, while its purgation is not complete. Total purgation of pity and fear, for Aristotle, would be a nightmare. Pity and fear are passions that, if felt in the mean, are salutary and virtuous, as noted above. Total purgation of them is precisely not what those

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<sup>146</sup> Lord 1982:127

<sup>147</sup> Lord 1982:128

<sup>148</sup> Lord 1982:129

<sup>149</sup> Lord 1982:128 The Greeks thought, he argues, that enthusiastic possession is based on abnormal physical and psychological characteristics. Melancholics were particularly prone to it, other men were less so. See also Lear 1992:317 for a careful analysis of the medical aspects of the catharsis of enthusiasm. He concurs with Lord that the catharsis of enthusiasm and tragic catharsis must be different. See also Halliwell 1986:190-195

who have experience trauma seek: they desire to feel them in the right places at the right time, and have some measure of rational control over them. To be utterly deprived of them spells psychological disaster. Another weakness of the purgation theory is that it fails to explain Aristotle's mention in the *Poetics* of the other thumetic emotions that the plot of a tragedy catharses through pity and fear.<sup>150</sup> Addressing only pity and fear, it leaves the "other such passions" completely out of the picture.

The purification hypothesis is less commonly held now than it was before, and by no means as clear or even as grounded in Aristotle's text as the other. It avoids the pitfall of identifying enthusiastic with tragic catharsis, but it fails to provide any other clear method of catharsis. It is often presented in different lights; however, its main tenets rely on tragedy to elevate and enlighten the passions through art. The view, although possessing significant pedigree since the time of the Renaissance, has largely fallen out of favor in more recent times. Jonathan Lear (who disagrees with the theory himself) quotes one proponent, Eduard Muller, as saying the following: "Who can any longer doubt that the purification of pity, fear, and other passions consists in, or at least is very closely connect with, the transformation of the pain that engendered them into pleasure?"<sup>151</sup> As Lear succinctly points out, Aristotle never speaks of such a transformation: the painful events of tragedy remain painful. We may derive a certain pleasure from tragedy, but that pleasure, as noted in Chapter II, stems from the recognition of an imitation. We can only recognize painful events in an imitation precisely if those events remain painful.

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<sup>150</sup> An English translation of the word "catharsis," at this point, still seems unhelpful.

<sup>151</sup> Lear 1992:318

Buchner provides another purification hypothesis. He maintains elements of the purgation theory, adding that the elevated nature of tragedy elevates our own sentiments and therefore purifies our pity and fear. In tragedy, he claims:

We are not confronted with outward conditions of life too like our own. The pressure of immediate reality is removed; we are not painfully reminded of the cares of our own material existence. We have here part of the refining process which the tragic emotions undergo within the region of art.<sup>152</sup>

No doubt elements of his hypothesis are true. Oftentimes the tragic hero is quite removed from lived experience, and certain elements of tragedy (lofty staging, beautiful diction, etc.) would likely serve to elevate the scene above the ugliness of real suffering. However, if those more beautiful elements of tragedy, through the working of the plot, fail to “painfully remind” us of our own lived experience, *mimesis* has not been achieved. In the only discussion of catharsis in the *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that catharsis takes place through *mimesis* of serious actions that arouse pity and fear. Without a recognizable re-presentation of an action or of a type of action, catharsis simply does not happen. Buchner’s mistake, I think, is endemic all nearly all interpretations of catharsis.<sup>153</sup> Simply put, he assumes that the lives of the Athenian audience were not noble or tragic, as if the theater of Dionysus would not have been filled with soldiers, generals, and politicians.<sup>154</sup> It was indeed filled with those who had suffered, if not what Oedipus suffered, at least like Oedipus suffered, as I argued in my first chapter.

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<sup>152</sup> Buchner 1951:261

<sup>153</sup> Buchner 1951:261, Lear (1992:318), Alexander Nehamas (1992:304), and Else (1963:440) make this mistake explicitly. In the following pages I will examine each of their statements on the matter explicitly. The only author to treat catharsis at any length that I have seen avoid this mistake is Carnes Lord, who recognized the similarity between the spirited emotional content of tragedy and the spirited ideal for the Athenian gentleman as set out by Homer and others.

<sup>154</sup> Modern American spouses have experienced catharsis watching Sophocles’ *Ajax* precisely because Ajax reminded them of their husbands, and they could hear their own sobbing in Tecmessa’s laments. For an extended account of a family whose lives were changed by watching *Ajax*, see Doerries 2015:111-152. Sheri Hall, upon hearing one section of the play, turned to her husband (a decorated veteran of several combat tours with the U.S. Army) and, speaking of Ajax and Tecmessa, whispered: “That *was* you...That is me.”

A third interpretation of catharsis makes it an education of character. Stephen Halliwell cautiously proposes such a hypothesis:

Simply to identify tragic *katharsis* with a process of ethical exercise and habituation for the emotions through art would be speculative and more than the evidence justifies. But to suggest that these two things ought to stand in an intelligible relation to one another (as the phrase ‘for education and *katharsis*’ at *Pol.* 1341b 38 encourages us to see them) is only to argue that tragic *katharsis* should be capable of integration into Aristotle’s general philosophy of the emotions...<sup>155</sup>

Halliwell’s goal of integrating catharsis into the broader Aristotelian philosophical schema is indeed a laudable one. Indeed, I argued in the previous chapter that tragedy served as education and purification of the *thumos*, and that catharsis was the means that it did so. The educative view of catharsis, however, can be taken in different ways. My last chapter emphasized that catharsis is part of an education of the passions. Halliwell interprets the educative nature of catharsis in too literal a light, arguing that tragedy served as a moral habituation, teaching citizens to feel pity and fear in the proper way, to the proper amount, in response to the proper events. My argument for the thumetic nature of catharsis maintains its educative character while eschewing the method of moral habituation with which Halliwell toys. Jonathan Lear, in response to just this argument from Halliwell, points out that Aristotle’s treatment of catharsis in Book VIII of the *Politics* (1342a) indicates that tragedy is best enjoyed by those already educated; tragedy is best for those who have already learned the basic appropriate ways to exercise pity and fear.<sup>156</sup> It is my thesis that tragedy is intended for those who have indeed learned virtuous responses to these events but either have unlearned them through trauma or stand at risk of doing so. As Aristotle notes in the *Politics* (1341b), the arts for recreation (including tragedy) serve those who have been worn out by past toils or are in need of refreshment in order to face future ones boldly and well. Such a statement reaffirms that

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<sup>155</sup> Halliwell 1986:196.

<sup>156</sup> Lear 1992:320

cartharsis is educative in nature, but that it is not so much a formation but a reformation of the thumetic passions. Again, Halliwell does not take into account the fact that the tragic audience would likely be in need of such reformation.

As noted above in my analysis of Buchner and Halliwell, the main weakness of the theories presented above is that they take for granted certain facts about the tragic audience that my first chapter calls into question. When writing of pity and fear in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle emphasizes the self-referential nature of those emotions. Fear, Aristotle writes, is a “pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future.” (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1382a21)<sup>157</sup> He writes, “from this definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever has great power of destroying us, or in harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain.” (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1381a25)<sup>158</sup> An event must be “imminent,” Aristotle writes, in order that it cause us fear: “it therefore follows, that fear is felt by those who believe something to be likely to happen to them, at the hands of particular persons, in a particular form, and at a particular time.” (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1382b34)<sup>159</sup> While the tragic audience may not have the particulars at hand, they must at least feel the likelihood of these particulars that cause fear coming to bear on them in order that they feel true fear while watching tragedies. A tragedy is a general imitation of type of an action, as Aristotle writes, so while the particular causes of fear for his audience may not be present in the play, a mimetic imitation of them must be present. Therefore, a tragic audience must at least be able to fear the same types of evils as the tragic hero

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<sup>157</sup> ἔστω δὴ ὁ φόβος λύπη τις ἢ ταραχή ἐκ φαντασίας μέλλοντος κακοῦ φθαρτικοῦ ἢ λυπηροῦ. All Greek text from the *Rhetoric* from *Ars Rhetorica*, Ross 1957. All translations of the rhetoric are from McKeon 1941

<sup>158</sup> εἰ δὴ ὁ φόβος τοῦτ' ἐστίν, ἀνάγκη τὰ τοιαῦτα φοβερά εἶναι ὅσα φαίνεται δύναμιν ἔχειν μεγάλην τοῦ φθεῖρειν ἢ βλάπτειν βλάβας εἰς λύπην μεγάλην συντεινούσας:

<sup>159</sup> ἀνάγκη τοίνυν φοβεῖσθαι τοὺς οἰομένους τι παθεῖν ἄν, καὶ τοὺς ὑπὸ τούτων καὶ ταῦτα καὶ τότε.



suffers. They must relate to the tragic hero (as Aristotle notes in the *Poetics*), as to a man not unlike themselves.

We may not expect pity to be as self-directed an emotion as fear, but for Aristotle, it is hardly less so. He writes: “Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon.” (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1385b13)<sup>160</sup> In short, in order that we are able to pity another person, that person must not deserve the harshness of the punishment he receives, and that punishment must be the sort of one we might expect to suffer ourselves. Aristotle notes that we cannot pity ourselves: an evil that happens to us is terrible, rather than pitiable, and pity tends to be driven out by fear, when they are felt for the same person in the same way. We can feel pity and fear at the same time, however, as long as they are for different persons; pity for those removed from us, fear for ourselves and those very close to us. (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1386a20) On this reading of pity, we cannot pity those evils to which we cannot in some way relate: only familiar disasters strike us close enough to home that we can truly pity their victims. In order that pity and fear be aroused in the tragic audience, they must consider that the evils experienced by the tragic characters could potentially happen to them. Perhaps it is possible to take such a claim too literally. In general, the danger that tragedy expresses is the fragility of human happiness and the ease with which virtue is overturned. Halliwell writes,

Embodied in this chain of actions must be at least a partial movement towards innocent (though not arbitrary) suffering, and the prospect or actuality of this suffering must touch agents with whom an audience or reader can feel an essential sympathy. I have tried to show that this notion of sympathy, which underlies both pity and fear, is not a vaguely humanitarian instinct: it is the capacity to recognize a

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<sup>160</sup> ἔστω δὲ ἕλεος λύπη τις ἐπὶ φαινόμενῳ κακῷ φθαρτικῷ ἢ λυπηρῷ τοῦ ἀναξίου τυγχάνειν, ὃ κἂν αὐτὸς προσδοκῇσιν ἂν παθεῖν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ τινα, καὶ τοῦτο ὅταν πλησίον φαίνεται:

likeness which imports with it a sense that one could imagine suffering such things oneself.<sup>161</sup>

In contrast to Halliwell's understanding that the audience must be able to relate to the evils experienced by the tragic characters, Buchner assumes his audience is not even reminded of their own sufferings by the plight of the tragic hero. Alexander Nehamas, writing on the emotions of pity and fear in the *Poetics*, claims:

We must still remember, however, that the pity felt in the tragic situation is felt sympathetically, and it is not obvious how this latter experience can be transferred to life: the point is not that it cannot, but that neither we nor Aristotle can assume that the phenomenon needs no further elucidation.<sup>162</sup>

Nehamas' analysis cannot accept the possibility that at least some significant portion of the tragic audience would have been familiar with circumstances comparable to those in the tragedies. But as noted above, those who have known deep tragedy in their lives do not need "further elucidation" to understand the point of Sophocles' dramas. To them it is quite clear. Lear makes a similar blunder. While addressing the purification view of catharsis, he claims that "virtuous people will experience a certain katharsis in the theater, but their emotional responses are in no sense impure..."<sup>163</sup> Lear seems to assume that virtue is unshakeable. If there is a single theme of Attic tragedy, it seems to be the reverse. In the tragic outlook, virtue is fragile. Betrayal can easily damage a virtuous life; *hamartia* can easily damage a virtuous life: this, indeed, seems to be the entire substance of tragedy. Gerald Else slips into similar problems when wrestling with the difficulties of his own interpretation of catharsis. He questions how a "normal" Athenian citizen might be able to pity the plight of a tragic hero whose sufferings and deeds (in Else's estimation) are nothing like themselves. He writes, "on the contrary it is evident in every line of the work that Aristotle is presupposing *normal* auditors, normal states of mind and feeling,

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<sup>161</sup> Halliwell 1986:183

<sup>162</sup> Nehamas 1992:304

<sup>163</sup> Lear 1992:318

normal emotional and aesthetic experience.”<sup>164</sup> By claiming that the tragic audience was “normal,” Else of course begs the question: whose “normal?” The normal audience of classical Athens would be an audience largely composed either of combat veterans who had seen the horrors of war face to face or those about to enter into the ranks.<sup>165</sup> All of these authors go astray by assuming that the Greek audience would have been incapable of relating to the extreme nature of the tragic hero’s suffering. The key, I will argue, to understanding catharsis is assuming that the Athenian tragic audience was a tragic audience in both senses of that phrase: they themselves were tragic figures, insofar as they had seen the horrors of war, or, if they were young men who had not yet deployed to combat, they would soon come to know them. At the very least they would know a friend or family member who had fallen in one of Athens’ many wars. Sometimes, therefore, we could expect *mimesis* to be as explicit as in the husband and wife referenced above who ‘saw themselves’ in Ajax and Tecmessa. It need not be, however. As I mentioned in my first chapter, combat trauma, is, in some sense, representative of the human condition at large. This more expansive character of *mimesis* would allow any tragedy to provide catharsis for any audience that could feel pity and fear when presented with the fate of the tragic hero. The closer their association with that hero, the more effective the catharsis would become.

The analysis from the *Rhetoric* provided above simply requires that the audience have such an association. In order that we pity and fear the tragic hero, there must be some chance that events similar to those he experienced happen to us or might happen to us. In other words, we must be in such a situation that we already recognize or are taught to recognize by the tragedy itself that we face very real risks of insanity, betrayal, and death in order for catharsis to work at all. Such an audience is not Else’s “normal” audience, nor Lear’s mild, virtuous folk, nor those

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<sup>164</sup> Else 1963:440

<sup>165</sup> See my brief description of the City Dionysia in Chapter 1.

trapped in Nehamas' petty everyday existence. For catharsis to function by means of pity and fear, at least some of the audience must have already experienced deeply traumatic events of some character. As I have mentioned, Doerries has performed *Ajax* and *Philoktetes* for American military soldiers and veterans around the globe. Describing the soldiers and their families for whom the plays were performed, he reflects:

to them and to thousands of other military families, Sophocles' plays were not museum pieces or 'problem plays,' as classicists had so often labeled them; nor were the performances jarringly extreme. To them, no matter how abrasive or emotionally charged the actors' voices became, this was kitchen-sink realism.<sup>166</sup>

While Doerries and his audience may not have a precise and scholarly definition of catharsis ready at hand, they have seen it at work. Greek tragedies only become museum pieces and 'problem plays,' and catharsis only becomes an insoluble puzzle of endless scholarly debate when scholars cease to really understand the context of the plays.

I believe the understanding of the importance of the tragic that I have presented demands a radical revision in the way scholars understand catharsis. While this theory may be new to classicists, clinical psychologists have now been practicing it for years, though not in connection with Aristotle's *Poetics*. (Indeed, given what I have written, it would be a sign of monumental hubris on my part to propose a completely new theory.) Shay is one of the clinical psychologists who have been practicing this method of therapy. I will quote his method at length, and then, as he himself indeed does, note the similarities between his own method and what we know of Athenian tragic theater. His method does not precisely match Aristotle's understanding of catharsis, but with the minor modifications I present below, it certainly illuminates our understanding of it.

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<sup>166</sup> Doerries 2015:120

It is necessary to begin our examination of Shay's theory by understanding the nature of trauma. Trauma in its very nature breaks apart the convenient logical strings of causes that we use to connect the events in our lives. Shay explains:

Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused.<sup>167</sup>

In short, connecting traumatic events as if those events were "necessary and probable," in Aristotle's phrase, allows a trauma survivor to reestablish an intelligible order encompassing the seemingly episodic events he has experienced. Doing so allows him to regain at least some perspective on his experiences: he can look at them, as it were, from the outside, or look back on them, as if they had come to an end. This narrative formation can be effective if the narrative becomes communalized. Shay writes, "Narrative heals personality changes only if the survivor finds or creates a trustworthy community of listeners for it. Several traits are required for the audience to be trustworthy."<sup>168</sup> Shay then lists the requirements for the audience: the audience must be strong enough to listen without themselves being traumatized, they must be able to listen without blaming the victim with moral guilt, and the audience must be ready to experience some of the same emotions that the traumatized veteran experiences.<sup>169</sup> In short, the audience must be able to relate emotionally to the experiences of the trauma victim. They must summon the same emotions as the emotions related by the trauma victim. Ideally, the audience has been in similar circumstances, or at least can understand the circumstances to some extent. Shay insists that "without emotion in the listener there is no communalization of the trauma."<sup>170</sup> In Shay's

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<sup>167</sup> Shay 1994:188

<sup>168</sup> Shay 1994:188

<sup>169</sup> Shay 1994:189

<sup>170</sup> Shay 1994:189

experience, when the trauma victim cannot make the audience understand or relate, he forces the audience to feel similar emotions to those that he felt: “intimidation, ‘acting out,’ and creating impossible situations sometimes aim at coercing the therapist to feel the fear and helplessness that the survivor felt. This is coercive communalization.”<sup>171</sup> Shay is describing, in essence, a *mimesis* by force. The ability to form this community of feeling without placing judgments on the value of the victim’s suffering is essential to successful therapy: “all who hear should understand that no person’s suffering can be measured against any other person’s suffering. It can be extremely damaging if anyone makes comparisons.”<sup>172</sup> Shay speaks of what he calls (following the word choice of the veterans he treats) “pissing contests,” in which some individuals or groups dismiss the trauma of another group as not as significant as their own. On the other hand, some “hierarchies of suffering” are assembled to the detriment of the sufferers, who refuse to see themselves as victims of trauma, thus eliminating the possibility for healing. A communalization of the trauma precludes both possibilities. When a whole community shares trauma, no one individual’s suffering is seen as less meaningful than another’s.

In summary, Shay’s method of treatment for trauma has two inseparable parts. The treatment must include the creation of a narrative, and the sharing of that narrative inside a meaningful community. The creation of narrative allows a veteran the perspective necessary to view his own suffering as a discreet, intelligible action, which can then be understood and fit into the complex tapestry of his life. The sharing of that narrative makes what was an individual burden a communal bond.

To test if this theory of clinical treatment could explain how tragic catharsis functions, let us turn to analyze the actual production of a Greek tragedy in a particularly military setting.

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<sup>171</sup> Shay 1994:189

<sup>172</sup> Shay 1994:192

Doerries presented his translation of *Ajax* and *Philoktetes* for a group of military men of all varieties, with astounding results. Doerries writes in moving prose of the effect he observed on the warriors who attended his production.<sup>173</sup> I will provide a brief summary. Doerries arranged a dramatic reading, in which members of his predominantly male audience were free to organize themselves in groups as they chose. More senior Marines congregated toward the front of his auditorium, more junior ones behind them. The Marines naturally formed groups according to their units. So far, all was proceeding as if his performance had taken place in ancient Athens. His production featured two, rather than three, tragedies. He chose *Ajax* and *Philoktetes* due to the obvious martial content of those plays. After the production, he had planned to allow for forty-five minutes of discussion. He had to cut off the conversation after three hours. His drama allowed soldiers to express sentiments that they otherwise would likely never have said aloud, let alone in public, let alone in front of their commanding officers and non-commissioned officers. Likely no soldiers experienced a complete healing of combat trauma through Doerries' production.<sup>174</sup> But if it had formed a single part of one of two annual festivals (the Dionysia and Lennaia), each featuring multiple tragedies and associated with many military trappings, one may imagine its healing and preventative power. Warriors would have a chance to be reminded (by none other than their fellow-soldiers and, in the case of Aeschylus and Sophocles, their generals) of the fragility of human goodness and of the inevitability of suffering. Through the

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<sup>173</sup> Doerries 2015:57

<sup>174</sup> The reader may notice here that although I have sought to provide an account of how catharsis functioned, my account is somewhat weak on details. For example, it does not seem likely that watching one tragedy would result in a complete healing of trauma, but that the steady rhythm of the seasonal tragic festivals would have provided the constancy needed to reform disordered emotions in the mind. Aristotle and the tragedians simply do not provide us enough information to explore such details. We can only infer from actual Athenian cultural practice that the repetition of cathartic experience is an essential part of its power. Shay notes that healing combat trauma is more like training to run a marathon than experiencing some dramatic, one-time experience of emotional catharsis. Shay 1994:187

pity and fear that they shared, they would be allowed release from their excesses of anger, spite, indignation, pity, and fear; that is, the disorders in their *thumoi* would be resolved.

This experience agrees with many of the stories told by Shay's patients. They struggle to experience compassion, that is, the ability to feel an emotion in common with another person. One veteran described himself as watching himself do things in the third person, emotionally separated from his family by a "dirty glass."<sup>175</sup> Putting back together the separated threads of their experience through narrative allows them to once again feel along with others. As has been noted, the capacity to feel along with others is the basis for pity and fear in Aristotle. The case that catharsis is the purgation of thumetic passions, functioning through the communalization of traumatic narrative, is compatible with Aristotle's argument in the *Poetics*. That narrative is essential to catharsis is stated explicitly. Aristotle counts *muthos* as the most important part of tragedy, and that it is the means by which pity and fear are to be aroused, bringing catharsis through pity and fear. He emphasizes the need for the *muthos* to have a necessary or probable order, making it a distinct and intelligible whole, with a beginning, middle, and end. This allows us to look at the narrative in its complete form, and see how each piece is connected. The worst sort of plot, Aristotle writes, is one that lacks this logical cohesiveness. The episodic plot would fail to provide catharsis for trauma because it would not reconnect the fragmented events that traumatic experiences prevent us from reconciling in any necessary or probable order.

One may object that tragic drama presented a generic action (in the sense that it occurs according to what is natural or what happens for the most part, as Aristotle says), rather than the particular sufferings of individuals, and that the general nature of tragedy differs from Shay's methods. Shay wrote of creating individual narratives and sharing these narratives with others in the community. In this respect, there is a genuine difference between the psychological method

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<sup>175</sup> Shay 1994:xv



and Aristotle's catharsis. However, we can still provide an interpretation of catharsis that adheres to the principles of Shay's method, if not the particulars. Tragedy takes individual tales of suffering and unites them in the one collective story. Each sufferer views the tragedy as reflecting his own sufferings, thus the individual nature of the narrative is not lost. The commonality of the narrative presents sufferings, as Aristotle says, in a necessary or probable form, allowing every individual sufferer to see his own plight in the plight of the tragic figures. Further, this sort of communalization eliminates the possibility for the "pissing contests" mentioned by Shay: when suffering is communalized with universal archetypes, there is no longer a place for one to say, "your suffering at Potidaea was nothing compared to what I saw at Delium," or, "your little walk to Delium and back was a picnic compared to the Sicilian expedition." By thus eliminating the chance for "pissing contests" in the very process of therapy, tragedy at its best would ensure an unbroken communal bond of shared emotion.

Finally, one may object that Aristotle gives no indication that catharsis is a communal experience in the *Poetics*. I respond with three points. First, we may glean the following from Aristotle's examination of pity and fear in the *Rhetoric*, quoted at length above: that tragedy forms a communal bond between the tragic hero and individuals in the audience, who are able to pity and fear because they are like him. Because they can identify with the tragic hero, the audience is able to feel pity and fear for him and themselves together, while recognizing their own innocence from moral guilt along with the tragic hero through *hamartia*. At least this imagined community of feeling seems germane to Aristotle's understanding of catharsis and to Shay's method of therapy. In fact, Else bases his whole theory of catharsis on this connection between the tragic hero and the audience. He claims that catharsis is the process by which we exonerate the tragic hero, and only secondarily, ourselves. Based on my analysis of the ethical

dimensions of actions inspired by *thumos* above (with which Else concurs), the tragic hero can be said to be legally guilty of *hamartema* (“error”) rather than *adikaia* (injustice or crime).<sup>176</sup> This allows the spectator to form a community of emotion with the tragic hero at least. In this way, even a private reading of the tragedies could effect catharsis. Secondly, claiming an individual and private catharsis runs against everything we know of the Greek communal nature of the *polis* and Aristotle’s political view of tragedy. What happened in tragedy happened to the audience as individuals only insofar as they were members of the larger *polis*. Lastly, Aristotle’s silence on the matter is easily explained: he would not need to make reference to the communal nature of catharsis, just as he makes no mention of certain other elements of drama (masks, for example). He would simply take for granted that catharsis, as the effect of tragedy, would, like tragedy, be a communal experience. The tragedies were performed at festivals where all of Athens could watch them together; it would hardly make sense for catharsis to be merely an individual and private experience. Furthermore, one would hardly expect individual and private catharsis to be the result of the imitation of actions that are not individual but that are necessary or probable. Ultimately, it makes far more sense to understand catharsis primarily in a communal, political light, rather than an individual and subjective one.

In this chapter, we have presented and discussed several theories for the functioning of catharsis presented by modern scholarship. Each of them either did not match Aristotle’s position in the *Politics* and *Poetics* because it failed to take into account the cultural milieu in which Attic tragedy took place. That said, each of the three theories that I examined has

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<sup>176</sup> Else 1963:438. Else writes: “The purification, that is, the proof of the purity of the hero’s motive in performing an otherwise ‘unclean’ act, is *presented* to him, and his conscience accepts and certifies it to his emotions, issues a license, so to speak, which says: ‘you may pity this man, for he is like us, a good man rather than a bad, and he is καθαρός, free of pollution.’” My understanding of catharsis has it take place in a different order and adds a step to Else’s: it assumes that we already realize that the tragic hero is like us, and once we conclude that the tragic hero is *katharos*, we can then infer that we too are *katharos*, thus moderating *thumos*. This cognitive and moral aspect of catharsis would come as part of the broader psychological catharsis based on the communalization of traumatic narratives.

elements of truth, and I hope that my understanding of catharsis synthesizes rather than entirely supplants them. While I will not present such a synthesis at length, a cursory glance at each theory will be adequate that such a synthesis is at least plausible. The purgative view of catharsis captures the medical, therapeutic aspects of trauma treatment; after all, my theory rests on the experience of a clinical psychologist. The purification theory captures the purifying element of catharsis; my understanding of the nature of catharsis could be described as a purification of *thumos*. The purification theory simply focuses too restrictively on pity and fear, rather than viewing *thumos* as a whole as the subject of catharsis. The education theory perhaps fits my analysis most closely. It is simply too cognitive in its focus and does not take into account the emotional reality of catharsis. My understanding of catharsis, in fact, unites all three theories into one broader system that more adequately explains both the cultural realities of ancient Athens and Aristotle's remarks on catharsis. The weakness of each of the three theories presented above is the narrowness of view that each takes, partially in the theory's analysis of Aristotle, but primarily in its understanding of the nature of the culture of tragedy in Athens. Put bluntly, each scholar assumed that his "normal" was also the "normal" state of affairs in ancient Athens. On just such a subject, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote the following admonition to modern classicists and historians:

If you are to venture to interpret the past you can do so only out of the fullest exertion of the vigor of the present: only when you put forth your noblest qualities in all their strength will you divine what is worth knowing and preserving in the past. Like to like! Otherwise you will draw the past down to you.<sup>177</sup>

My analysis of several modern scholars on catharsis revealed that each of them assumed that the tragic audience was "normal." With Nietzsche, we must wonder if these scholars have drawn the past down to their present, while others, who have known real-life tragic heroes intimately,

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<sup>177</sup> Nietzsche 1997:94

though perhaps less learned in the facts and philosophies of the past, can more accurately explain the nature of tragedy and catharsis. The practical experience of Doerries and Shay seems to indicate a view of the functioning of catharsis that relies on the narrative structure of the *muthos* shared in a communal experience of the tragedy. The elements of the *muthos* arouse pity and fear, and the communalization of that pity and fear that renews sympathy. The key assumption that distinguishes our analysis from that of the authors I have examined is that the audience would have likely experienced traumatic wartime events of such gravity that they could relate to the sufferings of the tragic hero.

### Conclusion

This essay has argued that the Greeks experienced and understood combat trauma, and that they used tragedy and the catharsis that it effected as a means of restoring the order of souls traumatized in war. Our examination of the horrors of hoplite warfare should leave us with no question that ancient warfare was no more clean, decent, or glorious than modern war. To treat the trauma induced those horrors, the Greeks did indeed practice certain societal mechanisms,

which our own society seems to so sadly lack. One of these was Attic tragedy. Certain of the tragedies explicitly speak to military experience, but the very nature of the tragic genre itself is a perfect portrayal of choices a soldier must make in combat. This is the case, I argue, with tragedies that are not ostensibly related with warfare, such as the *Oedipus*. If this is the case, the structure of the tragic narrative itself should imitate or re-present the sort of impossible choices that soldiers face. *Hamartia*, a key element of tragedy according to Aristotle's account, represents just this situation. *Hamartia* serves to bring about an *anagnorisis*, and, in association with this *anagnorisis*, a change in fortune, *peripeteia* in Greek, for the tragic hero. The narrative structure that presents these elements of the story brings about a certain pleasure. But more importantly, the purpose or *telos* of tragedy is the working out of a certain catharsis, through pity and fear, of such emotions. Aristotle's remarks in the *Politics* on the end of mimetic arts in general and tragedy in particular seem to indicate that it serves an educative function in the *polis*. This statement should be taken quite loosely, however, as he says that it provides an emotional rest from past labor and a preparation for future pains, rather than any strictly cognitive education. If it provides this cleansing of the emotions, what emotions does it cleanse?

According to the *Rhetoric*, the emotions similar to pity and fear mentioned in the *Poetics* are all thumetic emotions: all of those passions originate in the spirited part of the soul, or the *thumos*. *Thumos* is the seat of the political passions in every human being, and even more specifically, the passions most proper to the military profession. These passions are also the tragic emotions. An analysis of their role in tragedy reveals that they almost universally drive the action of the plot and exacerbate the *hamartia*, if they are not themselves part of the *hamartia*. They form the perfect candidate for this place, because we do not assign moral blame to someone who has committed a bad action out of *thumos*, as his action was due to a "necessary or natural" passion.

Thus, *thumos* forms the perfect candidate for causing a tragic hero to run afoul of the *hamartia* in himself and his surroundings. All of this also establishes *thumos* as the perfect target for catharsis: that which brings about the tragedy can be cleansed by means of the tragedy. Having concluded that catharsis is the restoration of balance in the *thumos*, I addressed several possible theories that seek to explain how catharsis works, testing them against the definition we had established. Each contains elements of truth, but was found lacking in explaining how catharsis functions due to misunderstandings of the role of tragedy as an antidote to combat trauma. An alternative theory, that catharsis functions through communalizing traumatic narratives, seems to fit both Aristotle's *Poetics* and the effective methods of modern clinical psychology as practiced by Jonathan Shay and others.

Understanding combat trauma as integral to the tragic experience of the ancient Athenians allows us to understand catharsis in a new way. Further, it notes the inseparable connection between philosophy, art, and life in Aristotle's thought and the practice of the Athenian *polis*. The Greeks' vision of an integrated education towards virtue, of course, emphasized the "higher things" and the pursuit wisdom for its own sake, but it also stood guard against the psychological ravages of war that would threaten the peace of the *polis*. Would that a similar unity of thought and action might stand guard over the souls of our own soldiers, whose minds have been ravaged by war.

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